The GREATEST KASHMIRI STORIES EVER TOLD

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selected & translated by

NEERJA MATTOO

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INTRODUCTION

Kashmir is a cradle of storytelling, with the art having been practised here since ancient times. Gunadhya, who wrote the *Brihatkatha*, translated as 'the great narrative', was a Kashmiri. Though the original text is now lost, parts of it have appeared in different versions from time to time, one of these being the *Kathasaritsagara* (ocean of rivers of stories), written in the eleventh century by the Kashmiri writer Somadeva. The *Panchatantra*, one of the most translated Indian works in the world, was also born in Kashmir. More writers followed in their wake, picking themes from other texts and weaving them into stories, for example *Banasur Katha*, which was based on the story of Usha and Aniruddha, two characters from the epic Mahabharata. However, these were all written in Sanskrit. It was only after the arrival of Islam in Kashmir that tales were told in another language, Persian, all written in the form of verse. Oral tradition has carried forward these stories—folk and fairy tales that are a document of a people's fears, hopes, and beliefs. They are full of strange occurrences, heroism, human foibles, and wickedness—universal themes, which people can relate to even now. The jinns and good spirits that haunt these stories are present today in different forms. This wealth of stories forms the repertoire of dastangos as they travel from place to place in Kashmir.

Kashmiri literature had its recorded beginning in the fourteenth century when Lal Ded the great mystic-poet uttered her vaakhs or quatrains, which are quoted even today. She was followed by other poets, both men and women, in the mystic and love lyric forms. However, it took a long time for prose literature to appear in the Kashmiri language. The short story in its modern form took an even longer time to arrive on the scene. The first attempt was made by Dinanath Nadim whose 'Reply-paid Card' was published in the magazine *Kongposh* some time around 1948. After this, the genre made rapid strides. For the past seventy decades, the art of the short story has developed to such an extent that Kashmiri short stories can be compared to the best in world literature. They also carry forward the tradition of being a reflection of the times, of people's aspirations and their non-fulfilment.

The history of the Kashmiri short story is the history of our cultural, sociological, political, and moral dilemmas. These stories reflect reality accurately, and fearlessly hold up a mirror to society. These first attempts at short story writing were all made for a purpose—to prove that a good time would come if one took the progressive route for a better future, based on principles of liberty and equality. The earliest practitioners of this craft were writers like Somnath Zutshi, Ali Mohammad Lone, and, of course, Dinanath Nadim, who were driven by a fierce sense of patriotism and a reformatory zeal. Theirs was a time full of hope and a belief in human perfectibility, so they followed a moral trajectory in the plots of their stories.

The earliest influences on the short story landscape were from the Progressive Writers' Association of India, which dominated the cultural scene in pre-partition British India from the late 1930s onwards and sought to transform society according to Marxist ideology, to remove poverty, inequality, and other evils that plagued it. The plots were straightforward, with the oppressor being overpowered by the power of the common people at the end. Some of these stories were written soon after the Pakistan-backed tribal invasion of Kashmir in 1947, when the valley was galvanized by a patriotic fervour, and strictly adhere to principles of authenticity of locale and culture. Dinanath Nadim's 'Reply-paid Card' is a classic example of this. It is set in rural Kashmir and depicts the determination of men and women who fight for the freedom of their land.

Somnath Zutshi's 'When the Light Dawned' is about the plight of the destitute in a newly freed land and talks about the motivation of the oppressed to transform their situation in life. However, as much did not change for the common man, the enthusiastic belief that things would only improve from one day to the next soon waned. Sufi Ghulam Mohammad's, 'Paper Tigers' follows in this vein. It explores the dismal goings-on in a baker's shop and the cruel exploitation of the workers who have become so dehumanized that they are not even aware of their abysmal situation. It seems to suggest that while things might change for the better, conscientization* is still a long way off. In this story, the person who tries to make the oppressed rebel and assert themselves doesn't succeed. Motivated by a social conscience, these writers wrote simple stories with a message. The craft was not too sophisticated; the story was easy to follow, the conversations and atmosphere were authentic, and the plot structure was linear. They had a mission—to point out social inequities in order to rouse the consciousness of people. Similarly, Ali Mohammad Lone's 'The Strange Mohalla' is about the situation prevalent at the time and focuses on a neighbourhood that is supposed to be a microcosm of the country. It too is a story of the marginalized and their plight.

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*Developed by Brazilian education theorist Paulo Freire, 'conscientization' refers to the action or process of making members of the oppressed classes aware of their political and social conditions, with the goal being the abolishment of the inequalities that they see around them.

Eventually, Kashmiri writers shook themselves free of the socialist ideals of the Progressive Writers' Association and began to probe deeper into the wider human condition. Now, they were not bound by a reformative zeal but looked around for timeless, enduring themes of a universal nature. Akhtar Mohi-ud-Din and Amin Kamil are exemplary of this change. Though Mohi-ud-Din's earlier stories talked about feudalism and its control over the lives of the ordinary people, he went on to delve into complicated issues of human, even philosophical interest. His 'Man Is of a Strange Breed' is one such story. Kamil wrote many stories of protest, sometimes using an allegorical style of narration. But his 'The Cockfight', a classic tale of human rivalry, is a deviation from the norm. With it, the writer asserts his freedom to tell stories about common folk that have nothing to do with larger economic or political concerns.

Akhtar Mohi-ud-Din and Amin Kamil threw the gates open and the writers who followed opened them even wider by experimenting with all kinds of subjects, no doubt socially relevant but also indicative of a writer's freedom to pick subjects of lasting human interest. These stories could belong to any time, any people. Hari Krishan Kaul's, 'The Mourners' is one such timeless story. Even though his main characters are Kashmiris, they seem to represent the drifting, shifting, lumpen elements found in any society.

Bansi Nirdosh's 'To Slavery Born' is a story to which the elderly in any society can easily relate. It sums up, movingly, the chasm between generations as far as expectations are concerned. Avatar Krishna Rahbar's 'Anguish' is about the worldwide phenomenon of polluted waterbodies—in this case the Jhelum of Kashmir, but, today, equally applicable to any river in the world. Deepak Kaul's 'Radhakrishna's Cat' is set in a Kashmiri Pandit household but the human psychology depicted here is universal. Shankar Raina's 'Whose Turn Now?' is set in a hospital where patients await recovery—or death.

The stories named above were essentially realistic social dramas without much stylistic adventure, but soon Kashmiri writers came under the influence of European literature and moved away from the simplistic, naturalistic style of writing to deal with more complicated philosophical questions. Hriday Kaul Bharati's, 'The Stranger Beside Me' is a good example of a writer using symbols and motifs to drive a point home. It makes use of

REPLY-PAID CARD

DINANATH NADIM

1

'Zoon Ded! Zoon Ded! Aren't you up yet?' Announcing his arrival loudly, Jamal Mir walked in and sat down on the doorstep. He pulled out a snuff-box from a pocket somewhere in the folds of his tattered pheran and taking a large pinch from it, rubbed it all over his teeth and gums. There was a little stick in his hand and with it he began to draw shapes in the dust. After about fifteen minutes had passed, there was a creaking sound to his left. He was startled and looked towards the noise. It was the door to the barn, which had begun to open, revealing the figure of Zoon Ded. Seeing her standing there, he felt as if he had sighted the full moon and his lips parted in a broad grin, as if the corners of his mouth wanted to touch his earlobes. He gave a full-throated laugh.

'Oh, you slime, it's you, is it? I wondered who it could be so early in the morning! How loudly you shouted!' Zoon Ded said with a smile.

Zoon Ded, grandmother to everyone in the village and a mother to the whole world, her hair white as snow, with deep eyes, full as brimming cups of wine, a high, commanding nose, long arms, dressed in a spotless white under-pheran, standing at the door like a queen from the wild forests.

'Why, Ded, the sun has risen so high and you still seem reluctant to give up your sleep?' said Jamal Mir through a mouth full of snuff-stained saliva.

'When will you learn some manners? I don't know what to say to you,' said Zoon Ded. 'Didn't you see me coming out of the barn? How could I be sleeping?'

Jamal Mir looked a bit sheepish, but still went on, 'No, Ded, I thought maybe because of Gula sahib, perhaps....'

This brought a thoughtful look on Zoon Ded's brow and Jamal Mir ate the rest of his words. For a while, they both kept their eyes on the ground. Then Zoon Ded spoke up with a sigh, 'You are right. You could understand about me, but just look what has happened to Badri—she touches neither grass nor her feed. It is she whom I have been attending to, since dawn.'

Meanwhile, some others gathered around and a regular assembly was formed.

Who was Zoon Ded? Where had she come from? How old was she? No one in the village knew the answer to any of these questions. Even the oldest among them did not remember her looking any different from what she looked like today. But Zoon Ded was everything to them—she ruled the village, she was judge, maulvi, police officer, nambardar, chowkidar, patwari. In fact, all authority rested with her. She was counsellor to the old and a friend to the young, a listener to mothers-in-law and a repository of daughters-in-law's secrets. When the panchayat met, it was Zoon Ded who delivered the verdict. If somebody had to be sent for forced labour, it was Zoon Ded who decided whether to send him or not. When marriages had to be fixed, Zoon Ded was the one to act as a go-between. When someone fell ill, Zoon Ded gave the treatment. The whole area knew that what Zoon Ded declared must prevail, her word was law and could not be challenged. Not even the viceroy could change her writ. That is why Zoon Ded's home was open to all villagers—they treated it as their own grandmother's place. Whenever they were in any trouble, even if it was merely a thorn that had pricked them, they would rush to her for comfort.

2

Bonapore is known as Kaav Maalyun or Kawpore, the home of crows, among the people here. The reason is that all the crows in the area spend their nights here among the high branches of the chinars, where many of them have built their nests. Today, too, the crows had started making a huge racket at sunset, so much so that even the rumble of the mountain stream had been drowned in it. Suddenly, there was the sound of a gunshot and all the crows flew away from their perches in the chinar, cawing loudly in panic. Who could have fired the shot? There, look, see that soldier advancing—it must be his doing, the crows thought, perched on the branches of fruit trees, turning their necks this way and that. A jawan, well built, with a broad chest, well-rounded shoulders, handsome face, graceful walk, looking like an officer from a foreign army. How he swaggers along, with this striking air of nonchalance, without a care in the world!

As soon as he reached Heripore, all the children gathered around him, some hugging his legs, some putting their hands in his pockets, some scratching his gun with their nails and all of them setting up a shout of welcome, 'Gula sahib! It is Gula sahib. Zoon Dedi, it is Gula sahib. He has come home to you…it is our own Captain Gula sahib!' Singing the refrain this way, the procession of children reached Zoon Ded's doorstep. Throwing her door open with a bang, Zoon Ded came out. Her eyes were smiling, though she tried to keep a serious expression on her face. 'Oh yes, "Gula Chaab"' indeed! A captain, did you say? A cockatoo sahib, I say…if they made fools like him a captain, I don't know what they would do next!' But the mother and son were hugging each other, their arms entwined.

How was Gula sahib related to Zoon Ded? Nobody knew for certain—there are always as many stories as there are mouths to tell them. Some said he was her sister-in-law's daughter's son, some declared that he was her own grandson, while some others were sure he had been found by her on the stairs to the shrine of Makhdoom Sahib.

But why are we concerned about their real relationship? The fact was obvious to everyone that Gula sahib was her life, Zoon Ded lived for him. Since he had joined the militia, his name was always on her lips, she would talk of nothing else. His name figured in all her conversations.

'Did you hear, Vaasa? I received a letter from Gula today. He says that he killed seventeen tribal raiders in one single day!'

'Do you know Sonamali? Gula sahib, may God bless him, has sent me a reply-paid postcard! It is beautiful, as though not words, but pearls have been studded on this paper.'

'Jamal Mir, our seven generations have been blessed, such glory has been brought by a son like Gula! Today he is defending the honour of the whole of Kashmir.'

3

The day Gula sahib left for the frontline, the whole village was on its feet. At the first light of day, their kitchen hearths had been lit and by the time the sun rose they were all—men and women, the elderly and the young—at Zoon Ded's door. Some carried sanctified food from holy places, some brought talismans with powerful spells in them. Ordinary peasant women came with gifts of little packets of pickles or chutneys tied to the ends of their veils. Some even brought bundles of dried vegetables like turnips and haak leaves with them, the tuber braided with rope in the traditional style. As soon as Zoon Ded opened her door, they all rushed in, jostling for space, each visitor eager to be the first to give their gift.

'Here, Zoon Ded, take this plait of dried turnips. These grew from pure farm seeds,' said Rahti, the milkmaid, shyly holding out her gift. 'I had saved it for Gula sahib all these days.'

'Take this bunch of dried greens too, they are from the famous kohlrabi produce of Khashipore,' said Ramzu Begari. 'Tell Gula sahib that finding such stuff is not possible in the city!'

'Would you please take this little portion of pickle too, Ded? Tell him it is from genuine Kashmiri kohlrabi of Bonapore.'

'Zoon Ded! Please call Gula sahib. Why doesn't he come out? Is he still in his nightcap?' said Vaasa Bhat, hesitantly.

'Didn't I say that you had become senile? Would he be still sleeping at this hour? He has gone to the stream to wash himself. He must be on his way here now. Why, are you getting late for something?' said Zoon Ded jokingly.

'How you dote on him! It is just that I got this powerful talisman for him with potent mantras from Kanth Guruji and I wanted him to wear it in my presence,' responded Vaasa Bhat.

As soon as Gula sahib walked in after his ablutions at the stream, they all crowded around him, some hugging him, some kissing his forehead. When he came out dressed in his uniform and picked up his gun, their hearts swelled with pride. The women showered blessings on him, 'God be with you, Gula! May you reach the heights, may good fortune follow your steps!' The whole village walked along with him up for many miles into his journey. They only retraced their steps when they lost sight of him behind the trees.

4

The sky had been hazy since the day dawned. Before the sun could show itself, clouds had enveloped the whole sky. The cloud cover was so thick that it reached down from the high crags to the foothills. Blinding forks of lightning accompanied by loud, terrifying thunder came from the east. It seemed that the sky was gathering forces to send forth a huge downpour. Generally, on a day like this, the villagers preferred to stay indoors. But today they were all gathered in groups at the bank of the stream, talking in whispers. No one seemed to be their normal self. A little away from the groups of men, the cluster of women seemed to be silently writhing in agony. Bare-headed, half-dressed, and breathless, Vaasa Bhat ran up to them, clenching his fists as though to control his emotions, and burst into a loud wail. 'What is this I hear, Karim Joo? Oh God, what calamity is this? A disaster...disaster...' he lost his voice.

'Quiet! Be silent,' Karim Kral put his hand on his lips, 'this won't do. Take heart. Think of Zoon Ded. For her sake we have to be brave. We have to think of how we should inform her.'

'But how did it happen? Who brought the news? Who could have wished for it! Oh no...' Vaasa Bhat said through sobs.

'Who could wish it? Only our wretched luck! Last night Jabbar postman came and handed this card from Gula sahib to me—it was blank, just as it was when Zoon Ded had sent it from here. He must have...on the battlefront...' Karim Kral could not say anything more.

5

Broken in spirit and body, one after another they all reached Zoon Ded's house. Today, too, as usual, she was in the barn giving her cow her feed and talking to her. 'You have lost your mind, you have! Do you expect him to stay at your bedside all the time? Since he went to the front to fight, you seem to have been struck by paralysis! This won't do at all, don't you realize?' Then she heard a suppressed cough. 'Is it you, Vaasa? How come so early in the morning?' she said as she came out of the barn.

'You know this Badri has been ruined by Gula.... But, no, something has happened...is all well?' Seeing the crowd gathered before her, she was taken aback and asked, 'Have you all fought over something? Tell me, why don't you speak to me?' They all stood there, mute, choked into silence, unable even to give vent to a sigh. 'Go on, say something, why don't you? Has a mouse stolen your tongue?' she asked, but the colour seemed to be draining from her face. 'What has happened? Has something happened to me?'

At last, his face averted, Vaasa spoke in a low, hesitating voice, 'Zoon Dedi, we would die for you....' He couldn't go on, his voice broke and he wept loudly. Everyone sobbed, tears streaming down their cheeks, overcome by uncontrollable grief. Zoon Ded stood still, uncomprehending and began to speak as though to herself, 'Is my Gula all right? Of course, he is all right. Doesn't He know, with how many sacrifices, in exchange for how many...?'

Vaasa Bhat took courage and handed over the reply-paid postcard to her, 'It came yesterday, this postcard. It is a reply-paid one, but it is blank. I don't know....'

Zoon Ded seemed paralysed, but she stood there erect like a rock. The postcard, having been touched and handled by so many of them, was crumpled. She spread it out carefully and began to scrutinize it, back and front. A silence once again fell on the scene, a deathly silence. Not a sound was heard except for the murmur of the stream, which sounded like somebody was mourning a dear one at his graveside on Eid.

Within a few minutes, it seemed that Zoon Ded's face was covered in as fine a dust as rises when one winnows rice. All the wrinkles on it suddenly became visible. Two innocent tears appeared in her eyes, but were drawn back before they could fall.

'Hahahaha!' Zoon Ded laughed. They were all dumbfounded.

'Didn't I tell you Vaasa that you have become senile? If you had any brains, wouldn't you have been a tehsildar by now?' Zoon addressed them all. 'See, it is all written here, in clear words. Have you all lost your sight too?' She spread out the card. The creases on it did look like pencilled writing from a distance. 'See, what my Gula has written to me. He asks me to go and join the women's militia,' Zoon Ded declared with great authority.

The day Zoon Ded left, with a wooden gun in hand, dressed in her white under-pheran tied with a sash, a pall of gloom fell over the whole village. No child made a sound, nor did a single crow caw in the trees of Kawpore that day.

WHEN THE LIGHT DAWNED

SOMNATH ZUTSHI

Showers of snow had been falling for two days now, with no break at all. If one looked up to the sky one could see nothing but insect-like small flakes descending, dancing, and twirling to the ground. But if one looked at the houses around, the flakes seemed to grow bigger, like fat, swollen balls of cotton wool, as if a ginner were at work and masses of ginned wool had been piling up near him, or as if it was spring and all the pear trees had been gathered in one place and given a thorough shaking to make their white blossoms fall and cover the whole ground. Yesterday there had not been such a thick layer of snow, but today everything had been so densely blanketed over that nothing could be seen beyond a few feet. Everything beyond that was a blur of mist. The day was coming to an end.

At the end of his day, Rasool, wrapped from top to toe in a tattered, wet blanket, was walking home with long strides. He had been free from work earlier than usual that day; because of the unending snowfall there was not much work at Lallaji's shop. The bales of things that had to be loaded and unloaded would have been ruined in the snow. Besides Lallaji had begun preparations to celebrate Republic Day a day earlier and had sent off Rasool on several errands: to the Potters' mohalla to fetch earthen lamps, to the ginner to buy cotton wool for wicks, to the grocer for oil for the illumination, to the halwai to give him an advance for the sweetmeats he was to make, to the milkman to bring all the ordered milk and cream early in the morning. After Rasool had done all this and come back to the shop, Lallaji looked him up and down and asked, 'Well, have you done all that you were asked to do? Has all the stuff reached home?'

Lallaji had been doing business in Kashmir for a long time. He was originally from Amritsar, but now he had picked up Kashmiri too.

'Yes, Mahara, everything is done.' Rasool said, 'Could you please pass the chillum? I will fill it.' But Lallaji had lost interest in the conversation and was again engrossed in the accounts. Rasool stretched his hand forward and picked up the chillum from the hookah. He filled it with tobacco and live charcoal, put it to his lips and took some puffs from it to see that it was ready, then placed it on the ornate hookah with its coiled pipe and said, 'Mahara, my toes are ready to fall off with the cold and my son is also ill. Will you let me go now?'

Lallaji was still scanning the account book, muttering, as though abusing chicken-stealers. Rasool received no reply to his appeal. He kept looking at Lallaji, but not in his old, servile manner. Today his eyes had a deep, meaningful look, full of resentment and hatred. In the past, Rasool would not have even dared to look directly at Lallaji's face—the question of scrutinizing it or studying his dress had never arisen. But today he noticed it all, the pashmina shawl on his shoulders, the ornate hookah, the soft bolsters at his back, the embroidered sheet. Today, he understood everything: the high and the low, the black and the white. Even Lallaji had begun to notice this change in Rasool for some time now and suspected that somebody was trying to instigate him.

The snow kept falling and Lallaji continued looking over his accounts. Rasool waited, his eyes shifting between Lallaji and his own almost frozen, reddened toes in their two-paisa worth grass sandals. 'Mahara, may I be allowed to leave now?' he asked.

Lallaji looked up, 'What did you say? Leave? Oh yes, you may go now, but remember to come a little earlier than usual tomorrow.'

'Yes Mahara, provided my son is better.'

'How is he? You should give him lots of hot water to drink, the fever will come down. He will be all right, with God's grace.'

Wishing Lallaji goodbye, Rasool covered himself with his tattered blanket and, taking long strides, began his journey homewards. Lallaji had explained to him that a wonderful day would dawn tomorrow. And Rasool was thinking that tomorrow India was going to be given its total independence, meaning that at last it would be truly free—the Democratic Republic of India. But then he thought—if this was true, why didn't Samad Kak, Jamal Dar, or Quadir Sheikh tell him so yesterday? Didn't they meet one another every evening to talk and discuss the problems at the factory, the difficulties of weavers and embroiderers, the sufferings of the labourers? Why did they keep this important news from him? Lallaji had made so many preparations.

He walked on and found himself in Amira Kadal. A convoy of military vehicles was crossing the bridge. Tongawallahs were holding the reins of their horses and making them walk with careful steps. A band of road-coolies was trying to clear the snow, so that the horses did not slip. Apparently, there was to be an army parade the next day. Today the pavement on the bridge had no beggars or fakirs lining them, they had all been driven away. There used to be a whole horde of them, but today they had disappeared. Most of them were from the border areas of Gurez and Tulail, who had fled before the tribal raid. Where were they? Rasool crossed the bridge and saw only a little girl there, sitting atop a pile of snow, under the eaves of a shop, the hem of her pheran stretched out. There was also a hawker with a cart next to her, who had been told about tomorrow and the big procession. Rasool stopped near the hawker and greeted him. The man had heard that tomorrow they would all be free, really and truly free. As they began to talk, the little girl said to Rasool, 'The compassionate Prophet will free you too, as well as your near and dear ones! Give me a paisa.' Rasool was looking at her when an army truck advanced, tearing through the banks of snow, drenching the little girl's spread-out pheran completely. The sight made Rasool's flesh cringe. A memory stirred within him and, wrapping the blanket even tighter around himself, he quickened his steps and walked on, without so much as a glance behind him. It was late, though he had left the shop earlier than usual—his wife had insisted that he come back as soon as possible, for the sake of his son. He thought, 'she has no idea of what it means to work for a trader...what a hard day's labour it is...work that makes your blood ooze out of your very nails....' He must thank the snowfall, otherwise would he have had respite? Now where was he to buy ration for the evening meal, or the liquorice root, dried cowslip, and other herbs that his elderly neighbour Wahab sahib had suggested for his son's cough? There was no hakim nearby, and he could not carry his fever-stricken son far in this weather. He had gone to a doctor, but he had asked him to bring the child to his clinic the day after tomorrow, tomorrow being Republic Day. Rasool had begged him to see the child the next morning, but he had refused—tomorrow was a day of celebration, when everyone would participate and rejoice. Did he not deserve freedom from the nuisance of dealing with the sick for this one day?

As he approached his home, his sense of unease grew. A man who has no wherewithal, who is caught in troubles, will find his feet reluctant to enter the place where only more problems await him. His wife would ask, 'Did you bring anything?' Some of his children would gather around him, cold and hungry with neither warm clothes on their body nor any food in their bellies. Others would be sick. But he steeled himself—in spite of his situation, Rasool had spirit, and it was indomitable. It was late in the day now; there was no sound of birdsong. It seemed that the birds had sought shelter in their nests from the morning itself—it was that kind of day, the snow seemed to have blocked their passage too.

Rasool stepped inside the house, shaking his blanket free of snow, which was dripping wet. He was relieved to be home, but as he climbed the stairs, he saw a steady downpour from a leak in the roof. Rivulets of melting snow fell from the opening. He saw his sick son lying in one corner under a ragged blanket, his wife next to him, shrunk and sunken, like a lamp on the verge of being extinguished for lack of oil. The sight of her husband brought some colour to her face, as her spirit rose a little.

Rasool glanced at the other corner where a little boy and a girl were lying.

'Tell me, how was he today?' he asked.

'How should he be? The same as he was,' his wife answered.

'Did he have the decoction?'

'Just a few sips, that too with great effort.'

While they were talking, the boy had a bout of severe coughing. 'Baba!' he whimpered.

'Yes, my son, how do you feel?' Rasool put his hand on the boy's chest. He felt his rapid heartbeat. He had a raging fever. His breath came fast and thick. The mother looked first at her son, then at her husband.

'Well, children do get these illnesses from time to time…we must not worry,' Rasool tried to reassure his wife.

'But he has been like this for many days now. God forbid, if disaster strikes…' she heaved a deep sigh.

There was another leak in a third corner of the room. The earthenware lamp was beginning to sputter, its wick clogged with soot. Rasool went and trimmed it. 'Did Samad Kak visit?' he asked.

'Yes, he did. Jamal Kak and Quadir Sheikh too came.'

'What did they say?'

'They said you never told them about Sula being ill. Then they talked to each other for a while and told me that they would come in the morning with a doctor. They had tried to fetch him then and there but he refused to come—it was past nine and with all the snow….'

'Why don't you try to give him some more sips of that herbal decoction?'

His wife again sighed deeply and said, 'Come, get up my love! Oh God, the whole wide world has found freedom, and we? Nothing but misery and misfortune!'

'What does God have to do with it?'

The mother fed Sula half a cup of the decoction with great effort and persuasion. Then they ate a few morsels of rice themselves. She handed her husband a grimy quilt, soiled with encrustations of filth over the years. She herself lay down next to Sula. Rasool pulled the quilt over himself, took under it a skeleton of a kangri and tried to sleep. He was so cold that sleep did not come easily. He was tossing and turning when he saw the lamp was sputtering, and about to go out. The sight scared him. His sense of unease increased. Many things came to his mind then. The celebration tomorrow and then his anxieties. He had fought bitterly with his wife the day his son fell ill, and then he had regretted his behaviour just as bitterly. What had the poor woman done, after all? It wasn't as if her son's illness was her fault. He had had a fall in the yard and his clothes were soaked, dripping with mud. She had asked him to take them off. While she washed and dried them, the child had stayed naked for a couple of hours—his father had not been able to buy him another set which he could have changed into. The result was that he had caught a chill and had been ill since then. Thinking of all this made Rasool sigh…and then he was full of anger for Lallaji, who had been talking about the importance of the next day and how he was going to celebrate it as the day of freedom. Did Lallaji's children too have things like this happen to them? Did his roof leak in a hundred places? Did his children ever fall into mud? If they didn't have a car, perhaps they would also trip and fall. It is only people like us, he thought, who stumble and fall and injure themselves, but still get up and carry on. If people like Lallaji should once trip, they will never be able to get up. And they know it, he was sure. Only the other day when Lallaji had got angry and would have normally lost his temper, he had quickly controlled himself and spoken courteously. How long did he think he could fool people with his cleverness? How he had evaded Rasool's request for an advance of five rupees for his son's treatment the other day. Giving away money was like the breath leaving his body—oh these people would rather die than part with money! If even a paisa is unaccounted for, all colour is drained from his face, and this in spite of his plenty. He owned a couple of factories, jointly with Khwaja Sultan, in addition to being a commission agent. He had his own trucks, with five of them carrying goods that his brother based in Amritsar dispatched here.

The lamp was extinguished. Silence filled the room, only broken by the occasional barking of dogs, which seemed to send shivers through the dark silence.

Suddenly he heard his wife cry out, 'Rasoolya! Are you awake?'

'Why, what's wrong?' he asked.

'I am so scared. It was a dream—'

'Forget, it, try to sleep. Just check on Sula. Has the fever gone down?'

She stretched out her arm and touched Sula's forehead. 'He still has a fever, but maybe it has gone down a little. …It was a horrible dream, I say.'

Rasool tried to laugh, but his wife went on, 'In the holy name of God, I swear, I was terrified. Weren't they saying that tomorrow there would be a huge procession? That is what I saw…a mass of people in a huge procession, but the women were beating their breasts. I asked them why they were mourning and they replied that they had lost their children, they couldn't find them at all, and they were afraid that they would be crushed in the melee in which even grown-ups were being swept away. I told them that my own child was a bit uncontrollable and that when on the Maharaja's birthday a procession was taken out on the river, our son too would go with the children of the boatmen to watch the festivities on the river and how the motorboats would leave a turbulent wake, which made all the shikaras sway dangerously! Though the boatmen would try to pull their shikaras back, many would still capsize and then I too, I told them, would beat my breast.'

When his wife had finished narrating her dream, Rasool began to think: 'What does she know? She saw people being trampled in the procession to celebrate freedom, but here the wake of that movement is not over yet. And there is a difference—the wake that threatens to drown us, brings a flood of wealth to the likes of Lallaji.'

Rasool's anger and resentment grew. Once again, he thought of Lallaji and all that he had said about freedom. Sleep just would not come. He kept tossing and turning and thinking. Then it occurred to him: if what Lallaji had said was true, then it should be true in his case too, his dreams should also come true.

It was dawn. His wife was awake. She touched Sula's chest, his heartbeat was not as rapid as it been yesterday. His wheezing had stopped and the fever, too, had subsided.

Pausing his brooding, Rasool asked, 'Is he better, tell me?'

'With God's grace, he does seem to be a little better today. Perhaps he will be free of his illness soon.' She got up, covered the other two children properly, and went to make a cup of milkless tea for her husband. Rasool threw the window open. Snow was falling at the same pace, perhaps even faster than yesterday, and several inches had accumulated during the night. It was day, but darkness still enveloped everything. Today the falling snowflakes did not look like tiny insects to him, but more like a swarm of locusts descending to rob them of everything. He thought to himself: today, the pear blossoms must be falling in Lallaji's forest.

Fog and mist enveloped everything. One could not see beyond one's nose, right or left, front or back. The snow-covered electric wires strung across the big road and the small alleys looked like white ropes, but to Rasool they seemed like strong chains binding his whole family, shackling them. Life appeared to stand still, frozen. Something rose like a powerful wave in him. He stood up, agitated.

'Wife!' he yelled, and made as if to leave.

'Why, what is it?' she rushed to him. 'Where are you going?'

'I am going to Amira Kadal. I will have tea on my return.'

'But Samad Kak and Quadir Sheikh must be on their way and the doctor will not wait!' she protested.

'I am taking them along. The job cannot be done without them! The doctor can wait.'

'What job? What is the hurry?' she was puzzled.

He stared at her as if trying to gather all his thoughts in that moment. All kinds of thoughts, all kinds of desires, all kinds of longings, all pushing one idea forward, one idea.

Looking at his wife, Rasool said to himself, 'Yes, there *is* need to hurry, the task has to be accomplished. I have to be set free. The lamp must not die for want of oil. The Englishman is gone, why then does this snow not melt? Lallaji is a big man, we are small. Who made us small? We people must also become big. After all, the baby in the crib does not stay a baby in the crib. Sula too will grow big, provided he survives. He *must* survive, he has a right to life. The people who are free cannot die so soon. Why don't the foreigners lose their children to death? Firangis! The jugglers! Thousands of jugglers who fool us with their sleights of hand, loot us, destroy us with their tricks and cheat us of the fruits of our labour, deprive us of our honour, but cannot take away our spirit, no, never that.'

Rasool had worked himself into a rage and he began to roar, his lips and ears trembling, 'No room for jugglers here any more! We will rise and throw them out! Our Sula will live, Samad Kak's Omer will live, Quadir Sheikh's Jan will live!'

Rasool walked out, raising these slogans, his wife gazing after him dumbfounded.

The big roads had been cleared, cleaving the heart of the snow, but the alleys were still untrodden. Rasool was the first man to clear a way through his lane with his steps and join it with the big, main road. He felt that these roads belonged to the people who were free. These were the roads that had liberated humanity from chains and bondage, saved life from being frozen. Lumps of snow fell from the electric wires. Rasool looked up, the white ropes broken. He was sure that he was on the road to freedom and walked on with rapid, sure steps.

THE COCKFIGHT

AMIN KAMIL

The moment Shahmal spied Ghulam Khan entering the compound with the bird in his hands, she was up on her feet. She even forgot to wash her pheran, which had been soiled by her six-month-old baby. She felt as if she had found a treasure and cried to her husband, 'You have brought it! I was apprehensive that you would come empty-handed even today.'

She snatched the rooster from her husband's hands and began to stroke its feathers and comb. 'Four-and-a-half *rupees* I paid for it.' Ghulam Khan stressed the word 'rupees', as though to convince Shahmal that the bird was not a poor weakling.

Shahmal did not seem interested in the price he had paid; she had an eye only for the rooster, and joy bubbled within her at the sight of it. She placed it on the ground and cast a glance at the window of the adjacent house, raising and arching her brows. Then she addressed her husband again, in a slightly louder tone, 'This is the type of rooster I was looking for. Of course, the markets are flooded day and night with scavenger cocks, which the whole neighbourhood has bought.'

Ghulam Khan made no comment and walked off indoors.

The cock's legs were tied together with a bit of string and he hopped about with difficulty. He pecked the string that held him, throwing glances upwards as if to size up his surroundings.

Shahmal already owned two hens. They were, at this time, pecking for food in the heap of refuse in the compound. When the rooster's crow fell on their ears, they stood stunned and looked at him suspiciously—or were they trying to estimate the demeanour and nature of this newcomer? One of the hens moved towards him, swaying her body gracefully, in a seemingly disinterested manner, as if strolling about just for her own pleasure. The other hen, who was all the while clawing at the heap of refuse, raised a cloud of dust around her and bathed herself in it, as if to say, 'Ugh! I thought it was someone worthwhile. What is it to me? Let him be, whoever he is!'

Shahmal fetched a handful of rice and sprinkled it before the rooster. He fell upon it hungrily and went on stuffing his crop with huge mouthfuls, as if he had been starving for days.

When the hens saw this special favour done to the rooster, they ran and pecked hastily at the scattered rice gains.

Shahmal cast another glance towards the window of the adjacent house. Seeing no one there, she shouted loudly at the hens, 'Shoo, shoo! A plague on you! The poor hungry fellow! You won't let him feed in peace. One would think you had had nothing to eat for days!'

The hens ran away, clucking loudly. They knew for whom Shahmal's reproof was intended. Why, otherwise, would they have run for their lives? But, at a safe distance, they still pecked nervously at the stray grains of rice scattered around the cock.

'Congratulations!' Jani the Skinny leaned out of her window and called to Shahmal. 'When did this rooster arrive?'

Shahmal had been waiting for this call, ever since the rooster was bought, and the instant it came, she struck up an attitude, lifted up her head, smoothed out the imaginary creases in her pheran and, flaunting her silver earrings said, 'My husband has just bought it. Four-and-a-half *rupees* he paid for it.' Shahmal stressed the word 'rupees' even more than her husband had done a short while back.

'Must be from the countryside,' Jani expressed her opinion quite innocently, 'Yes, so it seems. A good rooster.'

'And just imagine, it is only seven months old,' Shahmal fixed the age of the bird arbitrarily. 'It is of a special breed, not usually brought to the town. And so expensive! Who would buy them?' After a pause she added in contemptuous tone, 'People here only want those scavenger cockerels!'

This remark set Jani's heart on fire. She knew that she herself was the target of these contemptuous words. Flushing scarlet, she moved away from the window, crying, 'I have something on the frying pan. You feed him as best you can.'

Shahmal chuckled at the empty window and with pursed lips, scolded the hens, 'Shoo! Shoo! May a blight fall upon you!' Again, she turned towards the rooster with pride and joy.

The truth was that Shahmal had wanted this bird out of spite for Jani the Skinny. While Jani had five hens and one cock, Shahmal had only two hens. She had once had three, but one fell ill and died, along with her five chicks.

Jani the Skinny's rooster would hop up from its compound to the wall which separated the two houses and from there it would hop down to Shahmal's compound. Having no male bird of her own, she welcomed these visits as providential, but disliked them intensely when she left the paddy or corn to dry in the sun. He would cling to her courtyard like a parasite. No amount of chasing could restrain him from coming back to eat and scatter the corn. Shahmal was afraid of leaving anything to dry in the sun. When at last her patience was exhausted, her pent-up wrath burst out and she released a volley of abuse on the bird. Jani the Skinny had heard her and, leaning out of her window, retorted mockingly, 'You should buy a cock of your own, do you hear? You welcome him on certain occasions, do you not? Yet the loss of a few grains of rice pinches you.'

Shahmal was cut to the quick by this remark. From that very moment she began pestering her husband to buy a rooster of their own. Jani the Skinny also took all possible care not to let her cockerel reach the other side of the wall.

Ghulam Khan evaded his wife for about a fortnight with one excuse or another, but it was impossible to put her off forever. He had to buy the rooster from a dealer in Maisuma Bazaar for three rupees, though he added a rupee and a half to its actual price to impress his wife, so that she would not say in her characteristic tone, 'Ugh, what a stinking bird you have bought! Were there no better ones to be had anywhere?'

Jani the Skinny's rooster was red and dotted with black here and there; Shahmal's new one was snowy white and dazzlingly fair. His gait, too, was more impressive than that of Jani's rooster. But the latter looked stronger with his sturdy limbs. This was the only distinction; otherwise, they were both of the same breed and almost the same price.

Night fell. Everyone went to bed. Shahmal propped up her elbow on the pillow. Resting her cheek on the palm of her hands and holding the baby at her breast, she thought of the new bird. 'How its sight must have set Skinny's heart on fire! Can I ever forget her pointed, poisoned words? Let her cock just venture towards this side of the wall. If I don't break his leg, don't call me Shahmal!'

With this decision, she chanced to look at her husband's face. He seemed indescribably handsome and a flush came to her face. She moved her elbow away and was laying her head on the pillow, when there was a sudden crowing from the pen. 'Cock-a-doodle-doo…!' Shahmal was stunned. She raised her head and listened intently, wondering if her mind was playing tricks on her. But there was another unmistakable crowing: 'Cock-a-doodle-doo…!' Shahmal felt as if her neck had been painfully twisted and snapped. She sat up in bed and cried, 'Oh, listen! Do you hear? Do get up and see.'

'Why, what's happened?' Ghulam Khan woke up with a start, 'Did you call me?'

'Didn't you hear? The cock. He is crowing now. At the fall of the night!' Shahmal's voice was a wail, 'What a creature of ill omen to bring home!'

'Crowing?' Ghulam Khan puckered up his face. 'What then? Are we to wake up for the Ramzan fast that the timing might delude us?'

'See what nonsense he talks!' Shahmal retorted angrily, 'Get up quick and kill him. Don't you know that a cock who crows at the fall of the night should be killed immediately? It is a creature of ill omen.'

'Oh, bother the ill omen! Go to sleep and forget those old wives' tales!' Ghulam Khan pulled the quilt over his head. Shahmal persisted for some time but could not persuade her husband to utter another word. He fell into a deep, undisturbed sleep and woke up at seven in the morning as usual.

Shahmal was not worried by the cock's crowing as much as by the fact that Jani the Skinny had heard it. It could certainly stir her biting tongue into action. Her sarcastic remarks would bore holes into Shahmal's skin: 'Was this why you were saying that you wanted such an excellent rooster? Roosters all over the world announce the arrival of dawn and light, but look at this ill-omened wretch; how Satan enters his nose soon after dusk!'

Shahmal did not go out to the compound after opening the door of the pen for fear of Jani the Skinny. This was very hard on her—she had hoped to answer Jani's questions, addressed, as they were, to the walls and windows but obliquely meant for her next-door neighbour.

Shahmal was crushed and stayed indoors while the hens frisked about the compound with the cock. She felt her stomach turn with aversion at the sight of the bird. And the rooster, unaware of all this, stretched his wings and danced around each hen one by one, fanning them gently. But the hens fled away as if saying, 'What's happened to you? Is this proper behaviour? You don't seem to look about you.'

Then they looked towards the door of the kitchen, wondering, 'Why is she nowhere to be seen today? Wish she would throw us some grains to peck at!' They ran towards the kitchen. The cock read their thoughts and followed them.

Shahmal's eyes chanced to fall on his legs. They seemed to her, from the claws to the top, the two ugliest chicken legs she had ever seen. Her repugnance deepened. But she dared not shoo the hens away; she did not want Jani the Skinny to hear her and show herself at the window. She quickly took out a handful of rice and threw it to the fowl from a distance. She would not have thrown any to the cock, but could she do that to the hens? The poor things could not be starved for the whole day.

When Jani the Skinny's rooster heard the unfamiliar crowing from the other side of the wall, he stiffened his neck and stretched his chest; his body became tense, all his nerves taut. 'Koota-katak-kootak,' he crowed at the top of his voice, as if calling out to the other compound.

'Koota-koot-koot-kootak,' Shahmal's rooster also stiffened his neck, as if in answer. 'I am the fair one. I wish you would come here and see for yourself. Why show me your fist from the other side?'

Shahmal did not like the noise. She wished the cock were choked and stricken dumb, so that Jani the Skinny would not hear him and be glued to the window. Instead of shooing him away, she picked up a lump of earth and threw it angrily at the bird, aiming at his head. It missed him but he was startled and started crowing loudly. Jani the Skinny leaned out of her window, 'Why are you angry so early in the morning? What has the poor thing done?' she asked.

Shahmal felt like a thief caught red-handed. Her whole body exuded sweat. The careful steps she had taken to avoid this encounter were of no avail. Jani the Skinny's words confirmed her suspicion that the woman had heard that cock crowing at nightfall and her words were disguised mockery. She mustered up courage and said, 'Why should I be angry? He doesn't let the poor hens come near the grain. That's why I'm trying to scare him away.'

'Newly come he is, that's why. Just wait and see him feeding them himself from tomorrow,' laughed Jani the Skinny.

'Yes, but that would be true only if we had to keep the bird. He has been brought for meat.' Shahmal felt she should not leave Jani a chance to taunt her afterwards. 'We would have killed the bird yesterday itself. But we decided to wait till the morning.'

'But why? Why will you kill him?' Jani perhaps thought that if they kept him, her own rooster would be left alone. 'See how handsome he is! And his voice too is impressive.'

Shahmal turned pale. She has heard it, after all, why else would she praise his voice? But she preferred to ignore the jibe in her reply.

'Oh, you think that I would care to keep these filthy, stinking cockerels which literally flood the markets? We cannot find the breed we want. But someone has promised to get it for us.'

Jani the Skinny could make nothing of these words. She wondered at Shahmal's new coldness—hadn't she been boasting of the rooster up to the heavens? But then, perhaps, Shahmal's words were meant for her because she was keeping a scavenger cock. She was about to make a sharp retort when Shahmal went indoors. Jani had to swallow her anger.

Blowing into the samovar, Shahmal was still deep in thought. She would make her husband finish him off; if he did not agree, she would have the bird killed by Samad the butcher. 'Let me see how he protests when the dish is brought before him at dinner.'

When Ghulam Khan returned home from the mosque, Shahmal poured him a cup of tea and spoke sternly. 'Drink up and then let us be done with the bird. What will the neighbours say? Don't we have to live amongst them?'

'What have the neighbours got to do with it?' demanded Ghulam Khan, chewing on a piece of bread. 'It's not the month of Ramzan that confusion would arise about the dawn.'

'Hunh! You only know how to talk and argue!' Adding after a while, 'If you don't want to, don't. I shall have him killed by Samad. Do you think that I'll fatten this monster of ill omen?'

'Do as you like', Ghulam Khan ended the discussion, 'only don't ask me to buy a cock again.'

'I won't. As if there were a famine of roosters in town!' Shahmal blew fiercely into the samovar. 'And then, Jani the Skinny's poor bird hangs about the courtyard the whole day; what do we need another rooster for?'

Shahmal wanted to be rid of the bird by any means. She was filled with a profound disgust for him. She saw Jani's white teeth grinning at her. The flutter of the cock's wings sounded in her ears like Jani's chuckle. He seemed to her to be the sole cause of all her shame and humiliation.

As soon as Ghulam Khan left for work, Shahmal went to Samad to see whether he was at home. He lived two or three doors down and butchering the poultry of the neighbourhood was his specialty. There were others too who knew the craft but his reputation as the expert slaughterer of fowl had somehow been established.

Samad was at home. He saw her from his window and, guessing her business, said, 'Go and bring him here. I'll kill him right now. But remember, I'll come to you for dinner. Don't imagine that only the two of you will share the feast!'

'You are welcome,' said Shahmal.

She came back home with a light heart, a smile on her lips. She was happy that she could now hold her head high; no longer would she have to listen to Jani's piercing taunts day in and day out. But a strange sight met her eyes when she stepped into her compound. The hens had retreated to a corner. Jani's rooster and her own were struggling desperately with each other, raising clouds of dust around them. Jani the Skinny was enjoying the cockfight from her window; Shahmal discerned a flush of joy on her face. She seemed sure of her rooster's victory, perhaps because his comb was smaller but thicker, his wattle clung to his throat, and his sturdy limbs made him look like a thorough fighter. He had trounced in fight all the other cocks of the neighbourhood.

The colour drained from Shahmal's face and her heart beat violently. The feathers of the cock's necks stood erect in perfect circles. Their heads trembled and shook with rage. This shaking had electrified their feathers. Their bodies seemed drawn out and the tail feathers swollen. They glowered at each other and stretching their trembling necks, transmitted messages of fire and rage. Recklessly they attacked each other, pecking and tearing sharply with their beaks.

When Jani the Skinny saw Shahmal entering the courtyard, she sat up confidently on the windowsill in a conspicuous position.

'What chance does my weakling of a bird stand against your four-and-a-half-rupee rooster? But who can prevent an ass from running risks? Will he have a sense of shame?' Dropping her sarcastic tone, she added, 'But let me warn you. He will chase your cock away. As a matter of fact, he has already trounced the other roosters of the neighbourhood.'

Shahmal's heart sank. But what could she say? She was stunned by this course of events. The suspicion rose in her mind that Skinny had deliberately sent her cock to the compound. She was filled with an overwhelming desire to strangle Jani's bird. But she repressed it and started to defend her position before she could be mocked.

'The foreigner chasing the native away! Don't you know the old saying? Besides, mine is not the one for fights. He is of a different breed, you know. That's why he is so expensive.'

The cocks raised hell, struggling furiously. They plucked each other's feathers till blood streamed forth. Jani the Skinny gripped the windowsill tightly and jerked her head, her face grew flushed with every movement of the birds.

Shahmal was also taut with suspense. She was devastated, and sunk into misery at what was happening. The sight of Jani's rooster inspired such horror in her that she abused him under her breath, 'May your beak fall in pieces! May your legs be stricken with palsy!'

Blood did not show much on Jani's rooster because of his red and black colouring. But Shahmal's bird, spotless white as he was, seemed bathed in blood. Seeing this, she could no longer restrain herself and burst out, 'May all calamities fall on the wretch! May palsy strike his sharp beak!'

'Take care, Shahmal, don't go too far', said Jani the Skinny, pretending to smile. 'Just watch when one makes the other run for his life. What did you expect?' She added, mockingly, 'Stinking cockerels are not as cheap as all that.'

Shahmal was utterly devastated. All sorts of misfortunes had befallen her one after another since the time this cock arrived. She wanted to reply to Jani in the same bitter tone, which the latter wouldn't have gulped down, because she was not a wit less talented than Shahmal in the art of sharp retorts. This would have led to an exchange of abuse and a battle of tongues, had not one of the cocks, all of a sudden, run away in fright. As it so happened, it was Jani the Skinny's. Shahmal's cock started chasing it round and round the compound.

Shahmal saw that Jani the Skinny had begun dripping with sweat, her face becoming the colour of the sooty side of a pan. But she also saw that Jani pretended as if she were not in the least interested in the outcome of the fight.

'Are you going to kill this bird?' said Jani, propping her chin up on her hand. 'Will you listen, and not slaughter him?'

'Oh, did you take my word seriously?' said Shahmal, flaunting her silver earrings with a jerk of the head. 'A bird of mine may have a thousand vices, he may even crow at the fall of the night. These are of no account in my eyes, if he has the proper fighting mettle. This was the type of rooster I wanted. Otherwise, is not the market flooded with innumerable, stinking, scavenger cockerels?'

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THE STRANGE MOHALLA

ALI MOHAMMAD LONE

This mohalla in the capital city of Kashmir, Srinagar! How dead and insensitive is this mohalla of the poor, the rich, the starving, the pleasure-seeking, the embroiderers, and the hawkers. Even after twenty-two years it has not been able to wash away the soot of notoriety from its face. People have long forgotten the name of Subhan Barber and even his agitation against whorehouses, but the name of this mohalla remains tarnished, as though even now, as evening falls, the shops of that time open once again with their human wares on sale, with Beauty sitting on display at a window, inviting Love to come in for fulfilment. It seems as if flesh and money are still engaged in a business transaction in the shops here, as if Youth is weighed in silver scales and sold off in slavery, as if Truth and Honesty, Love and Affection, Goodness and Gentleness are even now too ashamed to make an entry here. There are no prostitution centres here now, they have all shifted to boats on the Vyeth. These days, Beauty has withdrawn behind closed doors and windows, hidden itself in seven veils, walled itself in, and Love sneaks in like a thief in the dead of night, wrapped in darkness, to lay its head on her feet. And Youth goes surreptitiously into hotels and the chambers of the rich and other such places to be exploited now. There is no such centre in this mohalla any more, but still it carries that stain of infamy, its very name enough to provoke the gentle folk to shudder and the gentry to plug their ears. A girl from this mohalla is still tainted in the eyes of the outsiders and can hardly be accepted as a daughter-in-law by any other mohalla, nor does a girl from any other mohalla come willingly as a bride here. It is a strange mohalla, a bad, insensitive, and notorious neighbourhood indeed, a place which has not been able to wipe off the stain of disrepute from its face.

The women of this mohalla stay cooped up inside their homes now and the menfolk earn their livelihood through hard work to feed their families. The boys attend school, the girls go to the religious teacher to read the Quran, and the old women busy themselves with offering namaz and doing rounds of dargahs and seats of saints. The men are strict in offering namaz, keeping the fasts, and religiously following all the rules laid down. The women sit at the spinning wheel, take care of their children, and in the month of Ramzan and on Eid, they perform the Rov, singing the songs of Habba Khatoon with their plaint to parents, the love songs of Rasul Mir, the ghazals of Mahjoor, and the anthems of Azad. Every household performs the 'khatm-i-sharif', a gentle conclusion, once a month. Early morning, on every holy day, the area resounds with Quranic recitations from every household. Most women go to the shrine of Syed Sahib every Monday and Thursday with platters of yellow rice and a plea for a powerful spell to protect themselves, their children, and their animals. Not only this, no other mohalla, to this day, can boast of as important a role in the Kashmiri freedom struggle, as this one. Ever since 1931, there is not a single movement or agitation that was launched in Kashmir in which the people of this locality—men, women, and children—did not fully participate. They were the first to go forward with bare chests and empty hands and face bullets. Bullets, lathi charges, canings, imprisonments—they suffered them all, but still did not desist. But, in spite of it all, the mohalla carries a bad name, only because twenty-two years ago there were whorehouses here and trade between flesh and money used to be carried out in broad daylight, in everybody's view, without a sense of shame or embarrassment.

That shrunken old woman you see there is Farzi. She belongs to this mohalla. God knows why, but she is known as 'tuj', a twig. Maybe because she is thin like a blade of grass, so fragile that if you press her between two fingers, she will crack and break into two. But that can't be the reason. The ways of this mohalla are strange: if someone looks like a buffalo, the name in all likelihood will be 'Star' or some such. The people here are ready to add a tail-like suffix, a nickname to every name given to the people here by their parents in consultation with a pir, like Sula Mechanic, Sitara Crow, Ahad Jackal, Moma Deaf, Saja Corpse, and Farzi Tuj.

Farzi Tuj sits in front of her dwelling, selling roasted chickpeas and lentils from a basin in front of her. With legs spread out and eyes darting like an eagle's in all directions, she searches for a gentleman coming her way, not as her customer, but as someone on whom she could hurl an obscenity, startling him out of his wits, making him stumble and fall into the drain nearby, to the great amusement of her grandson Rashid and his playmates, who would then decorate him with an appropriate nickname. Farzi Tuj is not quite right in the head now. These days more than roasting her wares she enjoys roasting the hearts of the passers-by and the people of the area with the curses and profanities she showers on them. There is no one in the world, apart from her grandson, who can stop her from doing so. And who would dare? Would anyone like to compromise his dignity, or smear his name by getting involved with her? Her home is right beside the street, with no yard or anything in front. Actually, hardly anyone here has a back or front yard worth the name. Whoever passes this way, whether young or old, high-born or low, genteel or otherwise, is at once greeted by Farzi Tuj's choice abuses. Those familiar with this ritual ignore it and move on, but the ones to whom it happens for the first time, suffer the agony of a fish on a hot griddle. Her obscenities are terribly cruel, making the listener cringe in shame, but her being a woman stops him from dealing with her appropriately. Sometimes, on the occasion of Eid, the neighbours collect a donation for her and also give her some articles of clothing, in spite of being abused for their pains. Should anyone dare to say anything to her, she pounces on them like an ogress, acting like a veritable witch. Had she not been one, would she have lost three strapping sons in the prime of their youth, leaving behind no one but Rashid, the son of her eldest son, born after the death of his father? Rashid, now part of the gang of the neighbourhood children, is filthy, snot-nosed, has cracks in the soles of his feet, dresses in rags, and spends his time playing and fighting and abusing and being thrashed. His eyes seem perpetually in search of something, like a lost child, a withered rose, or a lamb separated from the flock.

Farzi Tuj has a bitter hatred for all government officials who go by her on their way to Sher Garhi, the secretariat—policemen, the ration depot bosses, court peons, and all others of their ilk. The sight of any one of these people is enough to incense her and she begins to rain abuses with even more vigour. Then she calls out to Rashid, who comes to her. She kisses him, wipes his nose, and pulls him under her veil, covering him with it like a baby, and weeps, great teardrops falling from her eyes like hail.

When her eldest son, Khalil, was old enough to work, her husband died. Khalil started working as an embroiderer in the silk factory. But soon, an agitation against Maharaja Hari Singh's rule was launched by the people. There was a rebellion, with people out on the streets, ready to face the bullets. Khalil did not go to work and joined the procession, raising slogans of 'zindabad, long live' and 'murdabad, death to'. His younger brother, Sula Chalak, was also with him. Suddenly, there was firing and Khalil fell to a bullet. Sula ran and threw himself on his brother. The forces took away Khalil's body in a vehicle, while Sula Chalak found himself in a police station where the policemen trod on his naked body with their spiked boots. Three of them stood on his chest, trampling him underfoot, while a white-clad, white-capped Kashmiri officer stood by, twirling his moustache and watching the torture with a pleased expression on his face. Then, they threw him into prison. Farzi Tuj beat her breast, pulled out her hair, dug her nails into her face, scarring it with deep scratches, while her pregnant daughter-in-law threw off her headgear, screamed and wailed, calling out her husband's name.

Some time later Sula Chalak was released, but it looked as if he had left his flesh inside. Farzi Tuj saw her son's shrunken ribcage, sunken eyes, broken nose, face yellow like the flower of a pumpkin vine and his bloodshot eyes glittering with a strange light. As soon as he came home, her widowed daughter-in-law ran away with all her ornaments, leaving her newborn son behind. Sula Chalak could not rejoin the silk factory. There was a constant tremor in his legs. Each step he took would leave him breathless and panting, and the world would darken before his very eyes. That is when Farzi Tuj bought a few basins, chickpeas, corn, and other such things and, seating Sula in front of the house, set up a shop for him. But Sula did not survive prison to sell popcorn. One morning, he vomited blood and the glitter in his eyes disappeared forever. Farzi Tuj did not cry that day, nor did she pull out her hair. She just fell into a choked silence. When her third son began to wail and call out the name of his brother, she seemed to wake up from a trance and like a mad woman, began beating and boxing his head, screaming, 'What are *you* alive for? Why didn't you die too so that I would find release? What further calamities am I waiting for? The very walls of this hut will eat me up!'

The neighbourhood gathered around her. They bathed Sula's body, found a shroud to wrap him in and before lowering it into the coffin, asked Farzi Tuj to take one last look at her son's face, but she refused. A woman put a handful of shireen on Farzi's pheran, asking her to throw them on Sula Chalak's coffin, but the sugar-coated spheres remained as they were on her pheran while the coffin was taken away.

That was the day Farzi lost her mind and began to abuse and spit on all passers-by. Two years later, her third son Ghaffar left with a Punjabi Muslim to work for him in Lahore. Meanwhile, tribal raiders attacked Kashmir and the streets and marketplaces of Srinagar rang out with the marching of the volunteers. Farzi Tuj also joined in the procession of demonstrators raising slogans against the invaders, 'Humlavar khabardar, hum Kashmiri hain tayyar', 'Attackers beware, we Kashmiris are ready'. The Indian Army arrived, the city was saved, and the raiders retreated. A long time passed, yet her third son never returned. Now, she just laughs loudly, spits, and abuses. Her neighbour Taja shuts the windows and murmurs under her breath, 'Devourer! That is how she devoured all the three.'

A strange place, this, where Farzi Tuj is still alive to abuse and spit on people, turned into a witch who destroyed her sons, while Rashid wallows in dust, mud, and grime, without anyone to lend him a hand or show him the right way—a lost child, a withering rose, a lamb strayed from the flock, running in all directions and, finding nothing but despondency on all paths he takes, turning back. Not a single person in this comatose mohalla comes forward to hold the hand of Farzi Tuj's Rashid.

This tall man with his flowing white beard, small eyes, thick neck, and grey hair is Wali Mohammad, Farzi Tuj's neighbour Taja's husband. He is the one on whom she was casting a burning shower of abuse a short while back. Now he has come out, a towel draped on his shoulders, to offer the evening namaz. His face bears all the telltale signs of piety. The innumerable times he has rubbed his brow on the floor in prayer has left a permanent dark, coin-like mark on his forehead, which he wears proudly. Before 1947, the year of the tribal raid, he had been a petty shopkeeper, but now he is a big contractor, dealing in lakhs. He is mostly out on business, but whenever he returns, he must swallow Farzi Tuj's obscenities. He can do nothing but leave for the mosque for namaz, with the towel on his shoulders. They have set up a school in the mohalla to give religious instruction to the children and Wali Mohammad contributes money to it. But Farzi Tuj's Rashid is not allowed admission here because Wali Mohammad thinks that now he is not fit for education, he can only become a thief or a bad character, or die like a dog gunned down on the road, as his father did.

Had there been any other way—lane or alley—Wali Mohammad would not have stepped out this way in front of her. But it cannot be helped, he must pass this way and listen to her profanities. When he was a small trader, he could bear it, but now, with visitors dropping in, he finds Farzi Tuj's presence next door intolerable, her obscenities worse than death. Whenever she began her abusive tirade, Wali Mohammad would grind his teeth and his mouth would open to retaliate, but suddenly close up, something would prevent him from responding in kind. But how long could this restraint go on? One day he had invited some other contractors to a meal at his house. Throughout the day, his cooks had been busily preparing the elaborate, multi-course wazwan feast. As a precaution, he had a large cotton rug hung up as a curtain to shield his house from Farzi Tuj's evil eye. She noticed it and it set her aflame with rage. As evening approached and the guests started strolling in, laughing and talking loudly, she screamed, 'Oh ho, Wali Mohammad! See, all these sons-in-law of yours are here, for their post-wedding feast! Come and receive them, you pimp!' Wali Mohammad could no longer control himself. He rushed out, and catching hold of her hair, dragged her through the lane. That day he swore he would not rest until he had driven her out of the mohalla—or he was not his father's son. To this end, he decided to stay home for longer periods and build relationships with the other residents of the neighbourhood, greeting them with a smile and being generally pleasant. He gave a generous donation to the mosque and got a permit for the supply of firewood to it for the winter months. He got the madrasa a new coat of paint. Now he began to lay siege to Farzi Tuj's home. But she was not easy game. There was a method to her madness. The moment she felt a change in Wali Mohammad's attitude, her own tongue held back. Wali Mohammad was frustrated. What could he complain of, to the people of the mohalla now, and with what face? What would they think of him? Then he went and found a broker and promised him a reward of three hundred rupees if he would buy Farzi Tuj's house for him. The broker was unfamiliar with the area, so he had to go about asking and finally found the place. He took a good look at the hovel and was puzzled at Wali Mohammad's offer: the wretched thing was not worth even five hundred rupees, why should he offer him a reward of three hundred to help him get it? When Farzi Tuj saw this stranger, wrapped in a blanket from top to toe, eyeing her home, she flung a fistful of dried peas into her basin and stared back at him. The broker asked, 'Sister, are you Farzi Ded?'

'No'.

'Then who are you?'

'Farzi Tuj.'

'Does this little house belong to you?'

'Yes.'

'Would you like to sell it?' The broker had hardly finished speaking when she aimed a big blob of spit at his face. He withdrew in confusion, wiping his face and chanting God's name. Farzi Tuj looked up and saw Wali Mohammad seated on his balcony taking quick puffs of smoke from his hookah. And then she stood up, arms akimbo and began to shower all kinds of obscenities on Wali Mohammad, as loudly as she could. Rashid appeared from somewhere, plunged his hand into the basin and pulling out a fistful, began to munch on the peas. Seeing him, she shouted even more lustily, 'Plotting to take away the shelter too from this orphan, are you, you thief! You think I don't know? But I can see through to the marrow in your bones, you pimp!'

Wali Mohammad quickly rose from the balcony and went in. The neighbours looked out of their windows and watched, but they could understand nothing. How could they? When had they ever paid attention to Farzi Tuj's rants? She had been in this state for years now, spitting and abusing. But they had never felt the need to ask her what the matter was or think over the reasons for her behaviour. When they saw Wali Mohammad leave his house, head bowed and a towel draped on his shoulders, they thought of him as an embodiment of gentleness and all that was best in humanity, someone whose very face radiated a glow of piety. While Farzi Tuj kept mouthing profanities, he just walked away and quietly entered the mosque. But his mind was focused on Farzi Tuj, and he burnt with a suppressed rage, as he mulled over how to get even with her. But he could see no way out and, instead of going home, went into a shop to have a smoke.

God knows what kind of a mohalla this is, one whose politics are discussed threadbare in a shop, all issues settled here alone. Whether it is a matter of sorrow or joy, a wedding or bereavement, this shop is what comes to their aid. This is where everything is arranged. You can call it the heart of this mohalla and its owner, Sula Gondol, its heartbeat. Sula Gondol was a ration depot holder before the tribal raid in Kashmir and in those days used to be known as Sula 'Control'. Somehow, the nickname got distorted over the years and from 'Control' it became 'Gondol'.

When Wali Mohammad entered his shop, he was sitting alone at the window, smoking and talking to an old woman standing outside. When he saw Wali Mohammad climbing the steps to the shop and seating himself on the ledge, he greeted him with a salaam and passed the hookah to him. Wali Mohammad took a drag of the hookah, then let out a deep sigh, prompting Sula Gondol to ask, 'What is the matter?'

'What can I say? Look at this Farzi Tuj! Why is she after us? We just can't step out of the house in peace. See what happened just now—someone came to offer her money for her miserable hovel and what does she do? Showers him with spit, curses the daylights out of the poor man, and hurls filthy abuses at me for no rhyme or reason!'

'Oh, forget her, Wali Mohammad, let her go to hell! Why bother with her ravings?'

'Oh no, Sultan Mohammad, you have to do something about her—she is a menace.'

Whenever anyone addressed Sula Gondol as 'Sultan Mohammad', instead of feeling pleased, it would make his hackles rise—he knew the person had an ulterior motive. So, when Wali Mohammad used the name, he understood that he must have an axe to grind, otherwise he was not one to bestow this honour on anyone. He answered, 'Yes, but what can we do? We can't kill her! After all, she belongs to this mohalla.'

'But I belong to this mohalla too! Okay then, let her pay me the money for my house and I will leave,' saying this, Wali Mohammad took long and fast puffs of smoke.

And Sula Gondol understood everything, and remembered the thirty-year-old youth and his fate. His blood boiled and his eyes were filled with grief and rage, but he swallowed his anger, controlled himself, and said with great restraint, 'How you do talk, Wali Mohammad! The poor grief-stricken woman, totally mad! Where will she find the money to buy your house?'

'How is that my responsibility? Let her at least stop abusing me.'

'But you are not the only one she curses. She abuses everyone, me and all others, left and right.'

Wali Mohammad jerked the hookah pipe away from his mouth and pushing it towards Sula Gondol, walked away, fuming and mumbling, 'All you people have no guts, no shame, otherwise would you have tolerated the presence of a demoness like her? No wonder this mohalla has a bad reputation. There is no room here for gentle folk like us!'

Sula Gondol took these words poorly, yet did not retaliate. Winter was approaching and the permit for the mosque firewood had not been issued yet. Had it been someone else, Sula Gondol would have struck him down where he stood, forcing him to eat dust. But this was Wali Mohammad, a citizen of this very mohalla who had progressed far enough to have become a big contractor now, who sat on a fortune, but still visited Sula Gondol's shop from time to time to have a smoke and discuss politics with him, who was someone who had always treated him with great cordiality. Thinking of all this made him pause and he changed his tone, saying, 'Oh come, come, Wali Mohammad, forget it, why waste your energy on a poor wretch? Do you know winter is almost here and still no firewood has come for the mosque?'

'Why should you start worrying about winter in the middle of summer? You just give me the permission and I will put an end to her in no time.'

Sula Gondol was aghast. He could no longer control his rising temper, but two women customers coming to the shop distracted him. An old lady's son came too, but on seeing Sula Gondol's angry, red face, retraced his steps. Meanwhile, Wali Mohammad took quick, fast puffs from the hookah and said, 'Just say the word and I will drag her out by her two feet and throw her out of her house!'

Sula Gondol stood up, as if stung by a scorpion and swinging his arms angrily, burst out, 'What gives you the right to say all this, you beggar? Or has this new-found prosperity gone to your head and made it overflow? Get up at once and leave my shop...you have polluted my hookah!'

Wali Mohammad was stunned; the pipe slipped out of his mouth. He rose, apparently to leave the shop. Sula Gondol was spitting fire while Wali Mohammad felt chilled to the bone. Several people had gathered around by this time and they began to ask:

'What is the matter?'

'Why are you in such a bad temper, Sula?'

'Is everything all right, Gondol?'

Enraged, Sula Gondol could not speak for quite some time. Wali Mohammad seemed rooted to the spot and stood motionless like a pillar in the middle of it all.

Sula Gondol swallowed his spit and without resuming his seat, said 'Look at the injustice! The poor, penniless, mad old woman, here. Who knows how long she will live—a day or a month? And look at this bearded fellow, he is demanding that we throw her out of the mohalla. And send her where, pray, I ask? If he is not comfortable here, why doesn't *he* leave and settle down somewhere else?'

Sula Gondol fell silent. Wali Mohammad began walking away and, suddenly, out of nowhere, Farzi Tuj materialized before him. The people in the street were busy talking and commenting on the situation.

'A real scorpion if there was one!' said one.

'Come to terrorize the half-dead, is he?' another spoke.

When Wali Mohammad saw Farzi Tuj approaching, he quickly wrapped the towel around his head and tried to sneak away, but she shouted after him, 'Hey, you bearded one! Where are you running off to now?'

The commotion on the street had brought the womenfolk out to their balconies and windows. They stood watching the scene below, asking one another to share details of what had happened. The children had also gathered in the street. It was quite the spectacle.

Meanwhile Farzi Tuj began to make funny noises, striking her right hand against her mouth, whistling and hooting after Wali Mohammad's receding back. The little children clapped merrily, the elders in the street guffawed, and the women above chuckled in amusement. This was entertainment of the highest order in which Sula Gondol's shop took centre stage and he glowed with satisfaction. It seemed like the festive eve of Eid. All the people of the mohalla—young and old, children and women were pushing into Sula Gondol's shop, buying tea, sugar, spices, and what not.

Truly it is a strange mohalla, a mohalla of ill-repute, riddled with scandal. There is no brothel here now, but a pious namazi is still made fun of, a respectable contractor is humiliated and disgraced, just for the sake of a mad old woman who devoured her three sons and whose grandson Rashid rolls in the dust and grime of this mohalla. This unfeeling, insensitive mohalla, at the very mention of whose name people shudder and plug their ears.

THE ROAD TO IMMORTALITY

HABIB KAMRAN

The ascetic stepped out of his cave one day. It was that time when the streams, lakes, and brooks gush out below the budding leaves of the willows, when hyacinths breathe out waves of scent into the winds, and when the almond trees are in full bloom. What did he do in the loneliness of his cave? What did he eat? And who attended to him or nursed him if he was ever indisposed? No one knew.

Only once a year would he emerge from his cave and reveal his radiant face to the people who had been gathering outside through the whole year. His sight would soothe their aches and wounds. Then, he would reveal the secrets of Being and Eternity to each one of those whose souls, minds, and hearts were tormented by the desire to know the answer to such perennial questions. He would do it for twenty-one days and then retreat to his cave, only to emerge the next year in the season of almond bloom once again.

People said that everything stood revealed to him—there was nothing, absolutely nothing in life that remained hidden from him. He could see clearly all that is ordinarily veiled from human eyes. There was no query to which he could not respond. He was never at a loss for an answer, whether distant or near, obvious or secret—it made no difference to him, no mystery of existence posed a problem for him.

That day, too, he appeared at the fixed time and season. His body shone with a refulgence that was not the brightness of the sun or the moon or any other luminous body. His eyes glowed like dazzling lamps. Joy ran like a current through the assembled crowd when they saw his face. A roar of happiness went up and all heads were bowed in reverence. But not a single person dared to go close to him to look at his feet in humility or touch the hem of his robe with their eyes.

Suddenly two men drew apart from the milling mass of people and with bowed heads advanced slowly to the ascetic's feet. One of them was an old man with white hair down to his shoulders and a long white beard that covered his chest. He had the look of a saint, a godly man. His eyes and brow suggested deep wisdom and profound knowledge. The other fellow was young and handsome like Kamadeva himself. Looking at his beautiful face would make one's heart miss a beat. He was dressed in royal robes with a crown on his head. His whole demeanour and carriage suggested that he must be a prince.

The old man bowed low before the ascetic and said, 'O wise and all-knowing man of truth! My companion, this handsome youth happens to be the scion of a vast kingdom beyond the borders of China. The light of his father's eyes he is! There is no rare, priceless jewel, or pearl in this world which his treasury does not contain. Nor is there any comfort or luxury which is not available to him in his palace. But one thing that he does not possess is a heart at peace. There is just one thought that has taken possession of him and stolen his rest. And that is what has brought me and my dear prince to your feet in the hope that here we might find the solution to the problem. My prince wants to know the name of the one who knows the ultimate secret of real well-being. He also seeks to know the place where he might be found.'

A faint line of annoyance appeared on the ascetic's face and he spoke in a tone of reproach, 'O venerable old man! If you don't know what you want to know, but still want to know, then I must say that you are unaware. If, on the other hand, you know, but are still asking, then I must call you ignorant. Why don't you do something that brings you lasting profit? What is it that prompts you to create a longing for that which can never be possessed in the hearts of simple and innocent young men like this prince here? Why set these freshly blooming poppies on paths where they can only find failure instead of success, sorrow and regret instead of happiness, ruination instead of welfare? Shame on you for having no compassion for these budding youths!'

The words seemed to give a severe jolt to the old man's heart. His eyes filled with tears and his voice seemed to be lost in his throat. After a while, he spoke in a trembling, grief-stricken voice, 'Accompanying this beloved prince and warning him of the pits and precipices of the path and guiding him to Truth is not a trade or commercial enterprise for me. I have long given up attachment to material joys and luxuries of this world. My accompanying him is only a kind of blessing, a benediction. My only purpose—or call it desire—in coming with him was to ensure his safety. I could not bear the thought of even a thorn pricking him and wanted to save my people from ruin and destruction and to ensure their progress, prosperity, and well-being. When his mother, the queen, gave birth to this prince, his father, the king, called all the soothsayers, stargazers, fortune tellers, healers, astrologers, and wise men from far and near and asked them to read his fortune and predict any dangers that might lurk in his future.

They studied the stars under which he was born and the way they would influence his life through their movements. They examined the prince's brow, body, hands, and feet and then they spoke with one voice to the king, "This infant is born with a remarkable destiny—whatever course he charts for himself, he will reach the highest peak of achievement. If he chooses to be a ruler, no other king can match him in greatness, power, and magnificence. But if he should choose a path of degradation, he will suffer great sorrow and anguish." This was certainly a matter of great concern for the king. The solution to the problem, the wise ones suggested, lay in keeping the prince within the periphery of the kingdom and giving him the highest possible training in the duties of kingship, statecraft, and all the martial arts, including horsemanship. They also advised the raising of a force of devoted and dedicated men, who would be ready to lay down their lives at the slightest hint from the prince, and they should always be on duty around him so that no harm comes to him at the hands of any enemy. There was no dearth of such men. Besides, the kingdom was rich in scholars and specialists in different fields. They were all sent for and they did their job well.

'Under their expert training, education, and guidance, the prince acquired knowledge, competence, and a magnificent, awe-inspiring personality fit for kingship. I was also requested by the king to stay with the prince to teach him to distinguish between Good and Evil, the basic tenets of justice and fair play so that they came naturally to him—in short, all those things that are called wisdom. I accepted the job because I wished the cherished prince and the people well and wanted the best for them. The prince proved himself worthy of all the attention and pains our noble king had bestowed on him. He excelled in every field, absorbing all that was taught to him. Besides, he turned out to have such a good nature and disposition that he became a darling of the people, all of them ready to lay down their lives at his feet, his slightest wish being their command. Then, the king removed the crown from his own head and put it on the prince's. He wanted to see for himself how well his son would run the affairs of the kingdom as its ruler, so that if he had any shortcomings, they could be corrected at once. The king, in fact, wanted to ensure that in no way should his feet stray onto that path of degradation that he had been warned of by the wise men assembled at his birth. But the preparations for the prince's coronation had just begun when a strange calamity struck our kingdom.

'The prince used to go hunting every Saturday. On this particular Saturday, too, he went to the forest as usual, accompanied by his force of horsemen, when they saw a madman sitting in the middle of the road. Their horses had raised clouds of dust as they came galloping and it had settled all over the madman's body covering his hair, eyelashes, face, and everything. As the prince came near, he saw the man. The madman returned his look and the two exchanged glances. The prince was filled with pity at the sight of the sad face and the shrunken skeletal figure covered with shreds of dirty clothing. He dismounted and went to the madman, to comfort him, give him some solace and cheer. The madman looked up, glanced at him fleetingly, and said in an impressive voice, "Go and look for the One-who-knows-the-secret, whose garments are woven of the radiant rays of the sun and who is lying on a bed of narcissi! Go and wake him up from sleep and he will tell you the secret of ultimate well-being."

'With these words the madman walked away, and has not been seen anywhere in the kingdom since. He had spoken words that no one had heard before, and left us with a riddle no one could unravel. But it left such an indelible mark on the prince's mind that he could think of nothing else. He just could not rid himself of it. Getting up or sleeping, he questioned everyone he met to tell him about the One-who-knows-the-secret and where he was to be found. The prince lost interest in everything else and became obsessed with this quest. It was like he had been caught in a witch's spell. The thought maddened him, and the situation grew worse day by day until the prince was no longer fit to fill his father's place on the throne, nor did he have any desire left to do so. This has brought us to your feet today. If the prince is not cured of his obsession soon, our king will have no heir to carry on after him and the people will be orphaned, helpless like so many dry leaves in the wind, and the enemies of kingdom will set fire to them, just as people do to heaps of dead leaves in autumn.'

All traces of annoyance were wiped away from the ascetic's face and these were replaced by compassion and sympathy. He said to the old man, 'What do you think I can do for your prince?'

'You can let him know where to find the One-who-knows-the-secret and how to get there. Just show him the way to reach him.'

'This is a very difficult question to answer. Ask me for something else.'

'Then you tell him that it was the raving of a madman that he had heard. That the fellow had lost his sanity, and that he was lying, spinning a tale, a fantasy that was a product of his imagination with no basis in reality. Tell him that he made up the whole thing to take revenge, because the prince's thoughtless horsemen had disturbed him unnecessarily.'

The ascetic answered after a pause, 'I cannot accuse that man of madness or of lying.'

These words suddenly brought a sign of animation to the lost, lifeless face of the prince and he cried out, 'That is what I have maintained all the time. That madman did not tell a lie. He could never be a liar!'

The ascetic cast an affectionate look on the prince and said, 'Maybe he told the truth, but the people who take that path come to a very grievous end. Give up the thought, my son! What you seek is very difficult to find.'

'Tell me who is the One-who-knows-the-secret and what is the secret he knows without which one cannot do? I must know,' the prince was staring out into space, his eyes fixed upon something invisible to the others.

'Stay here with me for a few days. I will take you into my cave, where no one but me has ever been. There, I shall let you into those secrets which even the One-who-knows-the-secret must be restless to know, lying on his bed of narcissi.'

The prince said once again in a tone of desperation, 'I must know who he is, where he is, and what the secret is that he alone knows. Otherwise, I shall bang my head against these very rocks outside the cave and die!'

The ascetic rubbed his hands in sorrow and addressed the old man, 'This prince appears to be one of those mortals who are fated to embark upon the arduous journey. Nothing shall deter him from going, I can see. But whether he will ultimately succeed in the effort or not is as much of a secret to me as it is to you or any other person.'

Then he turned to the prince and said, 'Young man, listen to me. Pay attention and concentrate on all that I say. One has to travel for a full six months in the direction where the sun rises, and then climb high snow-covered mountain peaks where the cold congeals the blood of one's veins into ice, through thick forests where the most ferocious beasts leap from tree tops to tear the body of an unsuspecting man to pieces, where the thorns or bushes are so long and piercing and their pricks so venomous that once stung the body is set on fire, where there are snakes and adders teeming in every corner to coil around a body, bite it, and empty their deadly poison into it, over those places where short-statured, dark-complexioned savages are lurking to pierce one with their flaming spears. After crossing all this terrain comes an endless desert, where there is only sand and nothing else, not the shade of a single tree or shrub to cool it nor any food or drink for sustenance. Only after one crosses this desert does one reach a garden—one even more tranquil and soothing than the Garden of Eden itself. It is in the centre of this very garden that the One-who-knows-the-secret is lying on his bed of narcissi. The one who can get there and wake him up from his sleep will become immortal, eternal.'

The prince, listening intently to the ascetic, said, 'Now I know where to find the One-who-knows-the-secret! I will go, certainly, and discover the secret.'

The ascetic again spoke with concern and love, 'Innocent youth! You haven't heard everything yet. Listen carefully. When you get to the sandy plain, you will find it pock-marked with rocks and boulders of different colours, just as the face of a man scarred with smallpox is. Know then that these rocks and boulders were once upon a time living beings like you and me who happened to cross that path at one time or another, as you are determined to do now, but once there, they all turned to stone, my dear child! The sandy plain too has its own secrets. Should anyone, while crossing this desert, look behind him even once, that will be the end of him—he will turn to stone that very moment. The one who can keep himself in check, control his mind fully, and not allow a backward look, will happily cross the sandy plain. There is no other danger lurking there which might harm the traveller. But there is no one so disciplined who has been able to resist a backward look.'

The prince answered in a confident tone, 'I will go in order to find the One-who-knows-the-secret. What do I need to look back for?'

The ascetic patted the prince's head with affectionate regard and said, 'My beloved son! My blessings go with you! May you find your destination! There will be no limit to your joy if you should be able to cross the sandy plain and no end to the number of people who will benefit from your accomplishing the task. But you will need all your forbearance, courage, and strength of will to prevent yourself from taking a backward look!'

'My master! Your blessings and good wishes are more than enough to carry me through. They will be my biggest protection,' said the prince. Then he fell at the ascetic's feet and continued, 'Do I have your permission to embark on my quest, Master?'

'Go in happiness and may you succeed! But, take heed, do not forget any of what I told you. The law of the sandy plain is inflexible—no matter who it might be, but once he makes the mistake of looking backwards even once, he must get petrified and turn to stone. There is no way that he can be saved from that terrible fate. Remember, the statute of the sandy plain is eternal, it can never be changed or modified. And one last thing, my dear Prince! No human being can enter that garden unless he goes on the quest with his own desire and will.'

Six months of journeying were over. The prince was traversing the sandy plain, advancing step by step, bare-headed and bare-footed, almost naked. His skin had turned black, like camel-hide out of which all moisture has been sucked dry by the burning heat of the sun in the desert. His feet were swollen and resembled fat little sacks stuffed with sand. His body bore innumerable wounds, some of which had healed while others remained raw. There were patches of blood all over him. What seemed to still draw him forward was not his nearly dead body, but an indomitable desire which had forced him to leave the comfort of his palace.

Two bags hung from his shoulders, one contained sattu, coarsely powdered corn, and the other a leather bottle of water. He would take a fistful of sattu and top it up with a sip of water once in the morning and once in the evening. That was all his nourishment in that sandy plain. When the night cooled the sands, the prince would lay himself down on them. The soft and cool sand would seem to press out all the exhaustion from his body. Daybreak would see the prince on his way once again.

There was no sign of a tree or plant in that desert. Not a bird flew through its air, nor could one see an insect or worm crawling anywhere. All that there was to see all around were stones—big and small, black and forbidding which seemed to be looking mischievously at the wayfarer, as if mocking his fruitless labour. Cruel and pitiless stones, which could tell you nothing, guide you nowhere, which had no feeling for your pain or grief. There was not a breath of wind, no sound to break the pervading silence—the silence of death. And above everything was the sun raining down fire, and the single human being who trudged along slowly with head bowed. His eyes were open, but he looked as if he saw nothing.

Suddenly, there was a rumbling sound of thunder which seemed to come from the cloudless sky and from it came a voice screaming, 'Catch hold of him and kill him! Cut him into pieces! Don't let him go any further!' Suddenly the prince heard horse-hooves as there was a horse galloping after him! And then the shadow of a horse fell before him. The prince knew that a horseman was chasing him. It seemed that he was riding bare-back, without saddle or bridle. His long legs reached down to the sand, his feet were being dragged on the sand and his long arms fell below the horse's abdomen. The rider lifted his right hand. There was a long and wide sword which he held just above the prince's head in the air. But the prince did not move his head or body even a hair's breadth left or right nor did he make any movement to save himself from the blow. He just hung his head even lower, as if preparing for the end, and closed his eyes. Suddenly, all noise ceased. The prince stood still for a while, then opened his eyes slowly. The rider had vanished.

The prince continued his journey over the sandy plain and finally reached a point from where the distance between the desert and the garden of the One-who-knows-the secret was as little as that which lies between the two horns of a bull. The prince was about to put his foot into the garden when a voice spoke behind him, 'My charming beloved! Won't you cast one look backward and see me?' It was an irresistible voice, as sweet as the notes from a golden flute, as pitiful as the wail of a bulbul separated from its lover, as deep as the chant of a dervish in ecstasy. The prince turned back to look and was immediately petrified and turned to stone.

A long time passed—a very long time indeed, nobody knows how long—till one day the angels heard a voice in the heavens appealing, 'All you angels, won't you find a way to set those petrified humans imprisoned in the sandy desert free?' As a result, all of them gathered together and elected an angel, the wisest and the most senior, and said to him, 'Here, take this pot and descend to the earth with it. Go to the garden of the One-who-knows-the-secret. Under his bed of narcissi, you will find a little stream running. Fill this pot with its water and go to the sandy plain. Once there, sprinkle a drop on each one of the rocks and boulders littering the desert so that the humans imprisoned in those stones will come back to life in their old form.'

The chosen one among the angels took the pot and began his descent. Suddenly the same loud resounding voice sounded again, 'Be warned! The angel's return to the heavens will not be allowed till the last of the petrified humans is released from his stony prison!'

The words brought a smile to the angel's face—he was confident that the task would be over in less time than it would take the wind to blow over the whole sandy plain.

Once the angel's descent was over, he entered the One-who-knows-the-secret's garden, filled his pot from the waters of the stream running under his bed of narcissi, and stepped out into the sandy plain. As he sprinkled drops of water on each stone and rock, one by one they all came to life—emperors, princes, valiant men, wise men, ascetics, sages, dervishes, all men skilled in one thing or another—back in their original appearance. But as each found himself released from his stony prison, he would touch his ears in a gesture of atonement, then run out of the desert as fast as his legs could carry him in terror. All the stones disappeared and there was just one left, lying at the edge of the desert, far ahead of all the others. The angel let a drop of water fall upon it and our prince was brought back to life. The angel's task was done. Recalling the voice he had heard in the heavens just before he left on his mission, he again smiled—it was so easily done and now he could ride back to his home in the heavens.

As the prince took a step towards the garden of the One-who-knows-the-secret, the voice he had heard just before he turned to stone, rang out again. The same sweet, plaintive voice steeped in a tone of sorrow and regret was calling out to him, 'My handsome lover! Beloved mine….' He looked back. Once again, he was petrified and turned to stone.

The angel was still there and let a drop from the pot with him fall upon the stone, bringing the prince back to life. To pre-empt another backward look, the angel stood before him and said, 'Dear Prince! Don't you remember who you are and the guest that brought you here? Or the one who guided you here? Or the wounds or bruises you carry on your body?' The prince answered, 'My friend, I remember well who I am and what has brought me here to this treacherous place, even the one whose words guided me all through—I have forgotten nothing.'

'My beloved Prince! Great is your forbearance. You have suffered grievously, while bearing the all-too-cruel pains. But the comfort and peace that await you with open arms is equally great. The only thing you have to do now is to take one small step and you will be in the garden. The only thing that stands between you and your destination is your own self, which urges you to look back. Don't turn your head backwards, walk ahead. There is just this one step, here lies the garden where the One-who-knows-the-secret has his abode, the one whose garments are woven from the gold rays of the sun and who lies on a bed of narcissi. Go and wake him up. The softest sound, softer than the sound that a rose petal makes when it falls upon still waters, is enough to rouse him from sleep. And then, you will become immortal and yours will be the eternal life. I myself will grant you the boon of eternal youth. Your sufferings are over, your pains ready to disappear for ever. Think of it…there is just this one step to take and not looking back…that is all and then you will be free till eternity.'

'My benevolent well-wisher! You hear the voice that speaks at my back?'

'I hear it, my good Prince.'

'And still you ask why I look back?'

'It is your good that I meant, my dear Prince!'

'Then do me a favour, my affectionate angel! You look back instead and tell me what the person with this fascinating melodious voice looks like!'

'Oh, why do you keep forgetting the advice of your guide again and again? Didn't he tell you clearly? Didn't he stress the fact in so many words that the statute of the sandy plain is inflexible, immutable, and eternal? Whoever looks back will turn to stone. The statute will not spare even me. If I give a backward look, I will turn to stone before I get even a glimpse of what there is to see. Have you heard of a stone being able to see or hear anything?'

'But you are an angel!'

'Even the one who framed the statute of the sandy place is not exempt from the inexorable law, nor can he now, if he so desires, change it! Know it, in short, that the day will never come when you can see or know what the person with this voice looks like.'

'Then I would prefer to remain a stone on this sandy plain for ever!' And with these words the prince looked back and became a stone once again.

Morning and evening of every day sees the angel making trips to the garden of the One-who-knows-the-secret. He fills his pot with water from the stream running under his bed of narcissi, returns to the stone in the sandy plain, sprinkles water on it, and the prince comes back to life. As soon as he opens his eyes, a voice calls out—sweet, melodious, and steeped in indescribable pain—'Handsome Prince! My beloved! Won't you look back even once and see me?' And the prince again looks back and turns to stone, and again the angel lets the water from the pot fall on him and the cycle goes on, never-ending.

The wisest of the angels, the oldest and most experienced of them all, who has been sent down to earth from the heavens to redeem the humans trapped in stones on the sandy plain is chained to his never-ending task. He laments and wails thus: 'Is there no one, born of man, who can set me free?'

MAN IS OF A STRANGE BREED

AKHTAR MOHI-UD-DIN

1

Mallah Subhan had still not understood what it really meant. But he felt a kind of kinship with that memsahib, that much was clear. It had become clear to him the moment he had picked up her body and carried it away from the foot of the hill, planting a couple of kisses on her blood-soaked face. That was when Mallah Subhan said, for the first time, 'The import of that matter is explained now.' Carrying the body in his arms, the feeling came to him: she is my wife…no, she is my daughter-in-law…no, no, she is my daughter…no, no, no, everything is explained today!

He had brought down everything from the hilltop: easel, drawing board, brush, and paints, picking up each and everything carefully, exactly as he had carried it all on his shoulder while going up, walking behind the memsahib. The only difference was that on the way up, she had been walking, running, and tripping on the hillside, but now on the way down she was a dead body, carried in Mallah Subhan's arms all the way to Shalimar.

It was a Sunday and the Shalimar garden was teeming with people, foreigners and Indians and, of course, locals, men and women. Outside the garden, the road was choked with cars, tongas, bicycles, and pedestrians. When some people saw Mallah Subhan coming from above the distant paddy fields, they did not pay much attention to him at first, but then he came into full view, the body of a memsahib balanced in his arms, the rest of the stuff slung on his shoulder, and tears streaming down his face. Everyone froze in their tracks and within minutes there was pandemonium.

A couple of sahibs came forward and took the body from Mallah Subhan's arms, put it in a vehicle, and handed him over to the police.

Mallah Subhan was charged with murder and tried. He refused to say anything in his defence. The only words he spoke were, 'The import of that matter is explained today.' To the judge he repeated the same words in broken Urdu. His English was fair, but his knowledge of Urdu was limited. He thought that the way he had understood everything through signs, the judge and the court too would understand the real meaning of the matter. But the judge understood nothing and Mallah Subhan did not have the words to explain what the matter was, the import of which was made clear now. Finally, he had to relate the whole story from beginning to end. When it was over, many people assembled in the court laughed at the audacity of his tale. One sahib told the judge in clear terms that it was 'all bullshit' and that Mallah Subhan was certainly the killer. But Mallah Subhan's story had set the judge thinking. He went on thinking for a long time, 'Maybe the man had tried to assault her and, in order to save her honour, the lady had thrown herself down from the hilltop? But no, the man was old, past eighty…. Still, nothing wrong with having him medically examined.' This was his first idea. Then he thought that perhaps the lady had some gold or silver with her and that Mallah Subhan might have finished her off to grab it, but his story did not suggest it. However, it would be necessary to write to the deceased woman's parents. But could Mallah Subhan's story be true? His face and all the changing expressions on it did seem to say that he was telling the truth.

After examining him, the doctor pronounced that Mallah Subhan was too old for sex. The woman's parents, who had arrived from England, were shown all her belongings that were left with Mallah Subhan and which he had produced in court. They said that was all she had taken with her on her journey to Kashmir—nothing was missing. Even after a grilling cross-examination by the prosecution, Mallah Subhan stuck to the statement he had made at the beginning of the trial.

Mallah Subhan was acquitted. But people were generally not satisfied and kept speculating on the case. Some concluded that the woman must have been mad. Others thought that Mallah Subhan had cleverly got away scot-free after killing the poor woman with God knows what intention. Still others commented that actually it was the hill which had been cursed by the fairies and the woman must have been a victim of its evil eye. But Mallah Subhan did not believe in any of this. For him, the memsahib was linked in some way to his son, Ramzan, and to himself also. Sometimes it seemed to him as if all three of them were actually one entity, or one another's children, or perhaps one family, or maybe close friends. He would rise at dawn and first look at the cloud formations above the hilltop and under the blue sky and laugh. Afterwards, he would gaze unblinkingly at a drop of water quivering upon a lotus leaf in the Dal, touch it gently to divide it into two drops, then three drops, before they merged once again into one. And if the drop accidentally slid into the lake and was lost in its waters, he would again laugh loudly, saying to himself, 'Now the matter is really explained!'

The other boatmen who saw him laughing and talking to himself, watching the sky and clouds, playing with lotus leaves by himself every morning, would shake their heads and say to one another, 'Poor fellow, he is gone. Totally mad! Both father and son were cursed. Ramzan too went mad and killed himself. Now it is just Mallah Subhan, God knows what harm he will do himself!'

2

The Houseboat, *H. B. Butterfly*, was still decorated colourfully like a real butterfly. Even now foreign tourists, ladies and gentlemen, came and stayed in it. Mallah Subhan had employed a helper too. Even in his old age, he served the guests very well and earned good money, to the annoyance of other boatmen. On the one hand he acted unhinged—laughing and talking to himself, watching the drops of water on lotus leaves or the gathering clouds with the fascination of a madman—on the other, he was doing his work as well, if not better than the other boatmen did.

Mallah Subhan was not poor, nor had he ever been in want. The houseboat was the legacy of his parents. They were the ones who had got him married. Four children were born to him after their death, two girls and two boys. His daughters were married off, but the sons were another story: one son had died when he was just seven months old, but to the other death came in the prime of his life.

It was the time of the 'German war', as the Kashmiris called World War II. Large numbers of Britons, men and women, came to Kashmir. All the houseboats were done up and occupied. There was not a single 'To Let' sign hanging on any of them. In the midst of this prosperity, Mallah Subhan's son ran away from home. He enlisted himself in the army. Mallah Subhan felt very bad. What had possessed his son to take this step, he wondered—God had been kind, provided them with their daily bread and more. Why should he throw it all away and join the war? Whose war was it anyway? What did they have to do with it? If anything, they should pray to God that the British are defeated and the Germans win and come here in their place; they were supposed to be better spenders. They are the ones who will bring prosperity here. Why is my son fighting on the other side? These were Mallah Subhan's thoughts.

But still Ramzan had run away. He had received a few years' education in a school and he wanted to put it to some use in the world. He found himself trapped like a prisoner in the waters of the Dal, encaged by the mountains on all sides. He wanted to break free, see the world. He would be amused by the foreigners coming here. What did they come to see here in Kashmir? What was there to see here? In their countries, there were railways, aeroplanes, factories, bombs, all kinds of arms, wars and so many other things. And here? Nothing, except these walls of mountains and a lake inside, the whole winter wet and dreary, with snow and its drippings, just one market worth seeing—and what does it stock? To Ramzan all these foreigners were fools to leave their countries and come to Kashmir to be in the midst of this muck. To him Kashmir was nothing but a trap in which he was forced to spend his days. He could not remember a time when he did not want to escape from Kashmir. Perhaps he wanted to run away to Lahore, or to Bombay or maybe to Calcutta or even England or somewhere else. But he had never had enough money to leave Kashmir and travel. That is why the war and the recruitment drive in its wake came as a godsend. He went to Hazuribagh to the recruitment office, got enlisted and boarded a bus that took him out of Kashmir.

For four years, nobody knew Ramzan's whereabouts and Mallah Subhan almost lost his mind with worry. His only son and he did not know where he was! Only two things kept him alive through these years, one was a photograph of himself he had sent from God knows which country and the other were his occasional letters. The letters communicated nothing but that he was well and also that there was no other place like Maej Kasheer, Mother Kashmir—everywhere else was a desert, a wasteland. Mallah Subhan did not understand these letters, neither did he feel the need to understand them. For him the only comfort was that Ramzan was alive and he had not forgotten Kashmir. His breast swelled with pride when he saw Ramzan's photograph. He had it framed and hung in the dining room of *H. B. Butterfly*.

Four years is not such a long time. The war was over and Ramzan was demobilized. He came home, looking exactly as he did in the photograph, dressed in a western lounge suit, clean-shaven, tall and broad shouldered. The only difference was that he was darker and something had gone wrong with his mind. What had actually gone wrong was something that Mallah Subhan did not understand until that fateful day. Not until the day the memsahib threw herself down the hilltop, with the cry, 'Ramzan showed me the way. That is how I will find life!'

When Ramzan returned from the war to Kashmir, he seemed to have regained his sight. It was early summer and he would laugh with delight looking at the soft earth coming back to life. He would say that the lands of Iraq, Egypt, and Arabia were devoid of feeling, utterly lifeless. The tarred roads, factories and railways of Europe, he said, were cold-blooded and cruel, as if the dead metal, steel, had stretched itself out and spread its cold body all over creation. Ramzan was full of such strange observations ever since he had come back from the war. He told them that all that steel had frozen the hearts of the people in those lands, which is why waging wars, destruction of lands, loss, and death meant nothing to them and that he would also have been lost if it had not been for the memory of the soil of Kashmir and the thought of its soft and gentle touch on his feet—they had kept him alive. The picture of the greenery of Kashmir in his mind would refresh his eyes, he would say, and the fact that his thoughts focused on it all the time had saved him.

When the people began to call Ramzan mad, Mallah Subhan too started to believe it. He heaved a deep sigh and left Ramzan's fate in God's hands, though he did try for some time to wean him away from these broodings. Ramzan would take off his clothes and, plunging into the Dal, swim away, sometimes turning back, sometimes going far into the distance, his head bobbing up and down through the water, sending Mallah Subhan into a panic. When he finally emerged from the lake, his father would ask him, 'Why do you do this? God forbid, are you really mad?'

Ramzan would laugh and say, 'Father, such a school of whitebait underwater! They were all swimming in a row and I followed them, going up and down as they did. There! Do you see? Such pretty things! I swam with them and turned back when they did. But, you know, they tried to trick me, seemed to be coming back and suddenly turned right, but they did not know me! I stuck to their side, they couldn't shake me off!'

Ramzan would rise at dawn, take out his boat and row to the Kabutar Khana island in the lake. There was a grove of willows there and the long, leaf-laden branches would trail in the water, as if a beauty was washing her long locks of hair. Along with the willow branches, long blades of grass, greening the banks, leaned out to hug the water. Ramzan would watch spellbound. It seemed to him that the green of the willow and the grass was melting and flowing into the lake—it was not water, it was not the Dal, it was the green of spring that flowed out as water from under the roots of the willows. And, sometimes naked and sometimes fully clothed, he would plunge into the water, aching to dye himself the same colour. He had an irresistible urge to merge himself into it all—this water, this green colour, this radiant light of the morning—and become one with them.

This is what made people who saw him call him mad. Mallah Subhan went to a couple of pirs and got talismans for his son, but none of it had any effect on Ramzan. He acted as if he had found something dear and precious, which had been lost to him. He could not understand why these people were not touched by all this beauty. He tried to explain to his father several times, 'Look father, look at that rising cloud. There! Don't you see it? It makes me feel as if my soul is flying with it! And you see that Harmukh peak, father? It is wearing a turban of pure gold! Don't deny it.'

But Mallah Subhan did not understand any of it then. Gradually, Ramzan stopped having conversations about these mountains, clouds, lake, and the willows with him. Now he would talk about these things to himself only. Occasionally he would speak and say, 'Father, my heart is ready to burst.... I would like to speak but I have no tongue, no words...look, look, there!' And then he would fall silent, hang his head and go and take his place on the bow of the boat.

In the end Ramzan actually lost his mind...at least that is what people said. But Mallah Subhan no longer thinks so. Doesn't he say that something has been explained now? That is why he does not believe it. But what difference does his not believing make? The people were sure that Ramzan had gone mad. He never went near the tourists, the foreigners. He did not serve them. He only sat at the bow of his boat, watching the play of water drops on lotus leaves for hours together, through the whole day, not lifting his eyes from the sight. Sometimes it would seem as if he was addressing someone. 'Is this what they call an unpierced pearl? Who could have set it in these plates? Why can't they see its worth?' This is how he would go on.

Summer was over. Even autumn was nearing its end, with what changes of colour! What a wealth of moods and hues there was around him! And Ramzan delighted in them all, laughing happily to himself, leaping up in joy. And now, it was winter. The lotus leaves withered and dried up. The thick tresses of the willows fell off. The turf was reduced to colourless skeletal twigs. Desolation ruled over the Dal and Ramzan too went into a decline. His eyes seemed to be searching for something that was no longer there. One day he asked his father, 'Where did it go, father? That green water, that green turf?'

Mallah Subhan saw that he had a fever, so he spoke to him gently, with great patience as if he was talking to a five-year-old, 'Let the winter be over, it will come back in spring.'

'How long do I have to wait?' Ramzan's tone was that of a sick child waiting for the hakim to come and finally allow him to eat normal food. Mallah Subhan did not reply. He would have continued to stay silent, but Ramzan broke the silence with, 'Winter is so cruel!' Then he went on speaking of things that spread a dark film of sorrow on Mallah Subhan's face. He did not want to hear any of it, but Ramzan went on and on. Finally, Mallah Subhan said with a frown, 'You should not wish for such things. You are still so young; you will see so many more springs.' Tears poured down Mallah Subhan's face. He was certain that someone had cast an evil spell on Ramzan.

That was the last meeting between father and son. The next morning when Mallah Subhan woke up, the sight that met his eyes, and seemed to snuff out their remaining light, was the corpse of his only son floating in the icy waters of the Dal. In the suddenly darkened world, he recalled all that Ramzan had told him the previous evening.

Though Ramzan's death made many people pity the old man, they did not find the event unexpected. It was as if they knew that he would kill himself one day, perhaps drown himself, or something else. So, his death did not surprise them. What surprised them, however was Mallah Subhan's instruction that he was to be buried on the Shankaracharya hill, known locally as the Mound of Solomon, and that in the grave his head should face the Dal. The people, puzzled, wanted to know why he couldn't be buried in the normal way, in a graveyard, but Mallah Subhan refused to tell. The secret of this wish stayed with him till he told it to that memsahib the other day, the one who threw herself down from the hilltop, and the one who he thought was his wife, no, his daughter-in-law, no, no, his daughter, no, no….

3

H. B. Butterfly was glowing with lights in every room. The sad looking sign of 'To Let', which hangs on houseboats during the months of winter, was gone. Mallah Subhan was happy—a young, unspoilt memsahib was staying in his houseboat. She was the daughter of an English colonel, who had come to Kashmir for the first time with his young wife seventeen years ago and stayed in Mallah Subhan's houseboat for two months, very well looked after by Mallah Subhan and his wife. When the colonel and his wife left for Calcutta at the end of their holiday, they gave him a very generous tip, brought little toys for Ramzan, who was three years old then. The colonel's wife would often ask for him and play with him in her room. Mallah Subhan had been well acquainted with lots of foreign sahibs, but with this particular colonel there was an exchange of letters too since then, with Mallah Subhan asking when he would come again and the colonel replying that due to work he couldn't make it, but would do so soon. He did come and stay in the *Butterfly* a few times afterwards. Mallah Subhan had heard that a daughter was born to the colonel, but he had not seen her until one day she came straight to the *Butterfly* with her father's letter in hand. In fact, the colonel had already written to Mallah Subhan about his daughter's visit and she was expected. A tourist's arrival is always welcome to the houseboat owner who loves his houseboat, washes it clean, gets it painted, and furnishes it well to make the tourist comfortable. Nothing gives him as much joy as to watch from his boat the happy activities of his guests through the houseboat windows. A tourist's stay is as much of a celebration as a wedding or a baby's first haircut or a thanksgiving feast to Pir Dastgir in the houseboat owner's family.

But Mallah Subhan was through with all that. None of these celebrations held any meaning for him. He had already married off his daughters, his son was dead, and he had lost faith in Pir Dastgir. He was tired now and just counting his days. But when this young, innocent fifteen- or sixteen-year-old memsahib turned up, he took charge of her service himself, not trusting his boy helper with it. The reason for this special care was that he had a closer relationship with her father than with other sahibs. Besides, looking at her age, he wasn't sure she would like it here and he wanted to ensure her comfort himself, so that she would stay. But, right from the time of her arrival, she took to the place as if she belonged there, laughing and enjoying herself. She would be up early, take her easel, board, paints, and brushes, sit at the bow and paint the mountain peaks, willow groves, banks, and paths on the canvas. She framed many of these paintings herself and hung them on the houseboat walls. One day, she asked Mallah Subhan to remove Ramzan's photograph from the dining room wall, because she wanted to hang her painting of poplar saplings at that very place. He did not like this at all. With all the available wall space, why couldn't she find another place for her painting? And then what was the use of wasting all this paint over making pictures of these crooked poplars and bare mountain peaks? But he couldn't say any of this to her. After all she was a memsahib and he just a boatman. Mallah Subhan removed his son's photograph and hung it in his own dingy boat.

The memsahib was not fussy or bad-tempered. She never complained about the food or the dust or the general standard of cleanliness. She was busy throughout the day, either painting or reading an English book aloud. Taking advantage of his old age and the memsahib's gentle nature, Mallah Subhan would sometimes come and strike a conversation with her, asking about herself. The memsahib was a student at Cambridge University in England. Her favourite poet was Wordsworth, because he sang of the beauty of mountains, hills, meadows, and pastures and she herself loved to paint these very facets of nature. She believed that whatever forms an artist painted on canvas or paper was painted by Wordsworth in words on paper. But these were things that lay beyond Mallah Subhan's comprehension. They would only sadden him somewhat, thinking of Ramzan. He wished he were alive today—he would have understood these enigmatic things and been able to communicate with the memsahib.

One day, Mallah Subhan saw the memsahib watching something intently through the houseboat window. He followed her gaze. Her eyes were trained on nothing but the water and a lotus leaf. Yes, that was it, because when he came back after a while, he found her painting this very leaf on her canvas. He noticed that she had drawn a water drop like a tika on the leaf and he was jolted by the memory of Ramzan. When he found his voice, he asked her why she was painting it. The memsahib smiled sweetly and said, 'When this picture of mine reaches a country where there is no Dal Lake, no lotus leaves, no water drops like pearls on those leaves, the people there will be made aware of what Beauty is.'

Mallah Subhan would have liked to ask her how that would matter, of what use would that awareness be, but she went on to say, 'The awareness of Beauty is what makes one human in the true sense of the term. Otherwise, what is the difference between beast and man?'

Though Mallah Subhan didn't understand, he nodded in agreement, turned away, and once again longed with all his heart that Ramzan were there.

4

Even now Mallah Subhan had not understood fully, though he did think that there was something to the two deaths: first Ramzan's and now the memsahib's. But he did not quite know how to explain its meaning. In his mind, he would go over the two events again and again, remember that Sunday when the memsahib had called him and said that she would like to go to Nishat and Shalimar gardens, and that he was to accompany her. That day he had his beard trimmed, changed into fresh clothes, spread out his best cushions on the shikara, hired a couple of hands to row it and sat down next to the memsahib on the cushioned seat. Throughout the ride, she kept reading out verses from Wordsworth in a passionate voice, nudging Mallah Subhan from time to time. She tried to make him understand that Wordsworth was a poet of the same Beauty and that he created through words all that nature has given birth to, nurtured and looked after with its own hands here. Mallah Subhan listened to her, amused at, though tolerant of, her childlike ways. But, sometimes, he thought of himself as ignorant and stupid and remembered Ramzan and his death and fell into sadness.

The memsahib wandered all over the terraces of Nishat garden, like a wild musk deer just released from its cage, now rushing back towards the freedom of the forest. Occasionally, she would sit down and ask Mallah Subhan to set up her easel and board. She would paint for some time and then, suddenly, get up and run. But, even in the midst of this frenetic activity, she painted half a dozen pictures.

Leaving Nishat garden, the memsahib went to the Shalimar garden. Her eyes now resembled those of someone who is drunk on some potent intoxicant. She sat down looking with heavy eyes at the huge chinars, the green turf, the rows of fountains playing, the tall cedars, as if she couldn't take her eyes off the sight. By now, it was four o'clock in the afternoon. She asked Mallah Subhan to set up the easel again. She picked up the brush and drew a scene that pleased Mallah Subhan also. Nodding his head and mumbling 'yes' to himself, he seemed to certify the greatness of her art. He really liked the way the rays of the sun spread themselves over the mountain peaks.

She finished the picture and got up to leave the garden. Mallah Subhan followed, shouldering her paint stuff. Outside the garden, she looked far into the distance, over the Dal Lake, at the mountains. Then she turned to him and said, 'Come, let us climb that hill.'

Today, he regretted why he hadn't stopped her, dissuaded her from the venture. He did think at that time that it was not right to climb the hill then; after all she had painted so many pictures already, what was the need to tire herself more? But he did not say anything, perhaps because in spite of everything, he was still her servant and could not deny her wish, and also, perhaps, some part of him was pleased to watch her innocent, impulsive ways.

It was the peak of summer. Mallah Subhan was tired now. The memsahib's face was a flaming red, radiating blazing heat. But the drops of perspiration on it conjured up the picture of a magician walking barefoot on a raging fire. The memsahib walked ahead and Mallah Subhan followed, climbing up the hill behind Shalimar garden. Her eyes had located a crag on the hill, not very high above the rice fields, towards which she was progressing. The crag stood tall and straight like a poplar. To reach it meant finding a longer route, to go sideways, skirting it. Undeterred, she trudged on, with Mallah Subhan behind, lugging the sack of her painting stuff, wiping his sweat. Though the sun was declining, its heat was still no less. It must have been around seven. The sky had spread a thin, silky veil of mist over itself.

The crag turned out to contain a little glen, the barren peak of the Shalimar hill behind it facing the Dal Lake, as though baring its chest to cool itself in its breeze. From there you could peer into a kind of well on one side and on the other was the sheer fall, a precipice looking straight down.

Mallah Subhan threw his load down and took a deep breath. The memsahib sat down and looked around, shading her eyes with her left hand. Then, with a distracted air, she asked Mallah Subhan to set up her easel and board, which he did. She began to walk around, resting her brow on her hand, deep in thought. Mallah Subhan expected her to talk to him in the usual way, but she did not, as if unaware of his presence and, with a sigh, sat a little away from him. For a while she sat still, but the way her eyes darted around, looking this way and that, she looked like she was searching for something she had misplaced—in the distant mountains, the sky, the waters of the Dal and God knows where else. Her restless manner suggested anxiety and a growing agitation of mind. She took out a little book from her pocket and turning its leaves, began to read from it, with the pure devotion that a virgin has while reading the Quran. Then she began to sing in a loud but sweet voice. Her eyes were closed as if drugged and the singing became louder and louder, like the song of a shepherd girl resonating from a high pasture through the hills: '*If you are hungry, I will feed* *you a milky gruel/ if you are thirsty, I will quench your thirst with ewe's milk.'* The song sent Mallah Subhan into an almost mystical trance. His eyes too were closed and his head swayed to the music. He found himself helpless to resist its power…this music and he were tied up together in a bond as a been, the wind instrument, is to a snake—invisible but strong.

The sun was about to set and gold flambeaus seemed to light up above the peaks to greet it. The colour of the sky changed. The dark mountains began to shine with an inner glow. The snowy peaks seemed to have put on their freshly starched turbans and between them and the blue sky were banks of floating clouds, as if so many apsaras of heaven were taking a joy ride.

The memsahib put her book down. Her eyes were now focused on the clouds. Unblinkingly staring at them, she edged towards the easel. She dipped the brush in paint and carefully put it on the canvas, but suddenly she paused—the sky was vast, the mountains spread out on all sides, below them were plateaus of red earth, next to them trees and clumps of bushes. Under the feet of this hill crag was the Dal with its silvery waters stretched wide. There in the distance was the Hari Parbat hill and at the other end the Shankaracharya hill. The lake was circled by roads shimmering like quicksilver and close by were the terraced green rice fields of Shalimar. Her eyes travelled over it all, the vastness of the scene from the ground to the sky with all its different facets and shades of colour. Could all this beauty be contained in her paints? No…no….

She threw her brush down. An artist uses art to enhance beauty, to finish the unfinished, to make the imperfect perfect—but the expanse here, this perfection, this beauty! What enhancement through art can be brought to it? No, none at all. Even an attempt to copy it in paints is an insult to it. She was greatly agitated. Mallah Subhan was afraid now. He had heard it said that fairy spirits had placed a curse on Shalimar hill. When he saw her standing still, totally immobile like a statue, he was scared. He could not understand what was in her mind. The memsahib was rooted to the spot, as if afraid to move. She thought of herself too as one of the objects placed there by nature itself and any shift in her position would mar the aesthetic arrangement, upset the carefully worked out harmonious balance or even provoke the hills, mountains, and the sky to move from their places. The result would be utter chaos. She stood still like a statue.

'Memsahib!' Mallah Subhan tried to wake her up. She heard and sighed, saying to herself, 'What a pity that there is no one here to guide me! Neither Wordsworth nor Van Gogh is any help.'

She twisted her hands behind her back, turning this way and that, agitatedly looking in all directions like a deer lost in the woods. Mallah Subhan remembered Ramzan. It was Ramzan before his eyes. She was talking to herself, 'There are only two ways. Either to gather all this beauty and hug it to one's spirit or to set the spirit free to allow it to become a part of this glory. There has to be a way….'

She was saying exactly what Ramzan would have said. It seemed to Mallah Subhan that it was Ramzan come back to tell him all this at this place on this hill.

The memsahib pointed to the cloud formations above the white peaks, but below the sky, and said, 'That spot there! Do you think somebody's spirit resides there?' Then she spoke to herself, 'It is not possible for a living person to reach such a place, but a spirit cannot ever be annihilated once it reaches there.' Then she turned to Mallah Subhan again, 'Do you think a soul lives there?' Mallah Subhan replied, 'I don't know about there, but on that hill to our left, what is known as the Mound of Solomon, a soul certainly resides. It is that of my son Ramzan.'

The memsahib was taken aback. She faced Mallah Subhan. Her eyes held a question: who was Ramzan? What about him? She had to know, immediately, now. There was great urgency in her manner.

And then Mallah Subhan told her the whole story of Ramzan. He was his son, a soldier, who had travelled all over the world in the German war, but survived and returned home; and how, once here, he had fallen in love with the water droplets on lotus leaves, how he was mad after cloud formations and evening shadows, how he would love to hug the streams, try to catch the scented breeze in his fist, eagerly looking for something in the willow groves and how people called him mad, and how Mallah Subhan too thought that he was mad.

'What happened then? Where is he now?' she was breathless with curiosity, her eyes almost popping out. Mallah Subhan thought she was perhaps feverish, but he went on telling her about his Ramzan. The knots in his own heart and mind were being untied in the exercise of talking about him. 'It was the beginning of winter, autumn was over and one day, Ramzan asked for me to come and sit close to him. He looked ill and said, "Father, where did it all go? That green water, that turf?" I did not understand. I thought he was ill, but still answered him, "let the winter be over, it will all come back in spring," to which he said, "winter is cruel, father, when will spring come?"'

The memsahib suddenly rose to her feet and a cry like that of a sick child escaped her lips, 'Spring is here, but the soul is still trapped!'

Mallah Subhan was narrating the rest of Ramzan's story, 'Then he said, "Father I cannot bear this desolation…if I die you must bury me on Solomon's mound, my eyes should face this way, towards the Dal. That is where I will wait for spring!"'

The memsahib's heart began to flutter, as if her spirit was eager to escape from the trap of the body. She felt as if a heavy weight was crushing her.

Mallah Subhan was weeping, but still speaking, 'It was that very night that he jumped into the lake. He was dead when we found him in the morning.'

The memsahib was standing and looking down, as if staring at her toes, and then she said, 'I have found the way…Ramzan is the guide…to set one's spirit free and lose one's breath in Beauty is life. I too will find life.'

And then, the world grew dark for him. Before his very eyes, the memsahib seemed to take wing—the next second, she had disappeared behind the crag!

For quite some time he sat silently, eyes closed. Then he opened them, cast a look at the mountains surrounding him and nodded his head as if in agreement with something and said, 'Now the matter is explained.'

He rose and slowly, without any fear, all conflict resolved, looked down from the edge of the precipice. The memsahib's body lay sprawled on the ground down below, her arms stretched out. She had fallen between the boulders.

He gathered all her painting things and climbed down, picked up the memsahib's body and, carrying it in his arms, walked towards Shalimar, his face wet with tears.

TO SLAVERY BORN

BANSI NIRDOSH

This was the last day. After forty years of slavery, Sansar Chand would be free. By now he had been beaten hollow—the pulp was gone, only the shell remained. And he did not want the shell to be battered any more.

How he had waited for the day when his son, Kundanji, would get a job! That would mark the dawn of his own freedom. Unemployed for three years after graduation, Kundanji had finally found a job in the accountant general's office. Sansar Chand felt like a king. Joy overflowed from his heart as if his son had not just become a clerk but scaled some hitherto unconquered peak of glory. The day his son received the letter of appointment, he gave a month's notice to his employer, the city merchant. He would quit at the end of the month. God had heeded his prayers—his son had found employment with a salary of 600 rupees. With his own pension of 200 rupees, it would add up to 800, quite enough for the family of four—the old couple and their two sons. He had already married off his elder child, a daughter, around the time of his retirement from government service, six years ago. Since then, he had been working at the shop along with the rest of us. He did not call it 'work', he called it 'servitude'. Not that he had anything against private service. For him, life itself had been never-ending slavery. He would often say, 'Look at me—a born slave! I began life as the government's slave, and now I am the Seth's slave. I was a drudge then and I am drudge now—the yoke has never been lifted.'

But now, at last, he was convinced that the days of his slavery had ended—his son had found a job and he had nothing to worry about any more!

Today, was the last day of the month. Sansar Chand was happier than he had ever been in his life. His son Kundanji was bringing home his first pay packet—400 rupees. He himself had been paid 400 by the Seth, and with his pension of 200, it too added up to 600. But the 600 his son would bring home seemed an enormous sum to him—more like 6,000 or even 6,00,000! I cannot believe that he could have felt as elated at the sight of his own first pay as he did today at the thought of his son's. My own pay was not more than Sansar Chand's—just about 400—but I felt rich for I could spend it just as I pleased. The house was run by my father and the elder brother. Since I wasn't married yet, hardly any responsibilities burdened me. There was a world of difference between my situation and that of Sansar Chand. In spite of a hand-to-mouth existence, he had given his daughter not only a substantial dowry, but fulfilled every demand put forth by her in-laws. He had even got into debt to ensure her happiness.

In order to run his house, educate his two sons, and feel somewhat secure economically, he had been forced to work for the Seth. But now, after years of running between pillar and post, appeasing God only knows how many devils, one of his sons had found employment. This was the moment Sansar Chand had been waiting for all these years, during which he must have told me at least 7,000 times, 'Do you hear, Majid Bhai, the day Kundanji gets a job will be the day of my release—too long have I been nothing but somebody's slave!'

Sansar Chand was very good at his work. Our Seth had never got along with those of his employees who understood the business of accounting, but Sansar Chand had been able to win his trust. In spite of having become well-acquainted with all his business dealings—black and white—he quietly followed all instructions, keeping the accounts without questioning Sethji's ethics. He would justify it thus: 'The Seth is responsible for his own sins; I only follow orders. We just happen to be his employees, no better than slaves and, therefore, already serving a sentence of penal servitude. Aren't want and slavery punishment enough? How we cringe and bow before the sales tax and income tax officers, begging them to overlook discrepancies—and that too not for our own sake, but only to provide comfort and cheer to the Seth—is this not a curse? Are we not serving a sentence rigorous enough? And what do we get for all this? Just 400 rupees on the seventh of every month!'

But on the seventh of the month, he would still touch his eyes with the 400-rupee pay packet, kiss it, and put it in his pocket, saying, 'Majid Bhai, why don't you plead with your God to let my Kundanji find a job fast? And then, I shall stretch my limbs and relax to my heart's content. I have never had a peaceful night's sleep, even after my retirement. First it used to be the fear of reaching the office late and annoying the boss, and now I keep awake with the worry that the shop must have opened—the Seth must have left his home...'

I knew that tonight for the first time Sansar Chand would sleep through the night, in peace, in freedom. Now he was nobody's slave. I myself had no experience of working for the government, but I agreed with Sansar Chand that private employment, particularly working for the Seth, was certainly worse than slavery, with any 'rights' existing only in the imagination. The employee is not supposed to be an individual, his only identity lies in the fact that he belongs to the Seth, body and soul—not only he, but all his ancestors, his family, even his neighbourhood—all must consider themselves the bonded slaves of the Seth. Throughout the day he is subjected to all sorts of humiliations, forced to listen to remarks questioning his pedigree, character, ability: 'Where the hell have you sprung from? Don't you have the least sense of how to deal with a customer? You eat enough for two or three, but your output? Zero! Which dumb mohalla bears you as its curse? Good for nothing! Fit for nothing at all!'

But, to tell the truth, our Seth was not that bad. He did not ill-treat his employees all the time. He was a much-travelled man and once or twice every month, he would take a trip to Delhi, Bombay, or Calcutta. He had a broader outlook than most others, but even then he thought nothing of making his employees do his domestic chores: collecting the ration, fetching the gas cylinder, escorting his children to school and back, paying his electricity and water bills. It was having to do these household errands for the Seth that I hated the most—it was like death. But, the others at the shop did it willingly. Sansar Chand too. He used to say that once you become the Seth's servant, how did it matter whether you worked at his shop or his house? If there was no work in the shop, he would extract it elsewhere.

* * *

It was winter, cold and frosty, a drab heavy atmosphere, under a brooding sky. The roads were puddles of snow and water; the bazaars empty like people's pockets. There was nothing green to be seen anywhere, no new faces, hardly anything to distinguish one face from another. Their heads bound in helmet-like woollen caps, clad in thick pherans or cardigans and overcoats, everyone looked tired, weary, worn-out—just like Sansar Chand. But no, he looked different. For the past one month, Sansar Chand's face had acquired a glow—a month since his son Kundanji had got the job. In his son's job he had seen mirrored the dreams of a secure, happy old age and now, they were about to become a concrete reality. Today was his last day at the shop. My heart felt somewhat heavy. During the past few years, a strange bond had been forged between the two of us. But at the same time, I was rather happy too—at last he was going to be free. How long could he have dragged his old body thus? For the past forty years, it had been one long tale of drudgery. Surely, he deserved rest. If his son did not provide it, who would?

Sansar Chand met all his fellow employees, bade them goodbye, and left.

'Sansar Chandji, do keep in touch, and drop in occasionally, will you?' I said and walked with him up to the main road. 'God knows whether we would ever meet again,' I wondered for a long time that night before I went to sleep.

* * *

Sansar Chand turned up at the shop as usual the next morning, creating a flurry of surprise among us all. He went straight up to the Seth and said, 'Sir, I want to withdraw my notice.' All the employees were pleased—the Seth most of all. But I wasn't. Taking Sansar Chand aside, I asked, 'But Sansar Chandji, you are going to rest and enjoy your leisure. Didn't you want to make up for all those forty years of toil? Didn't you say that you wanted freedom from this servitude? Then what happened? Didn't Kundanji get his pay?'

'Oh yes, he got it all right,' the words seemed to be drawn from him with some effort. 'But before reaching home, he had spent it all. On his clothes, shoes, and other stuff. What he said was quite right though. In my selfishness, it is I who had lost a sense of proportion.'

'But what did he say?' I asked impatiently.

'He said that he also had his needs, his personal expenses, his own commitments, and why couldn't the house run as it had all these years, without his pay?'

I found it hard to meet Sansar Chand's eyes. Shame suffused my whole being. I could hardly say a thing.

On the seventh of that month when I received my pay packet, I handed every paisa to my father. He could hardly believe his eyes—he almost collapsed at the sight of the money.

HUMAN HEART

UMESH KAUL

'Aunt Rajrani, please speak to Gasha and ask him not to marry me off to Fateh.' Mehar had made up her mind and so, came to ask for Aunt Rajrani's help.

Aunt Rajrani pushed the kangri against her right knee, filled her chillum with a live coal, and asked, 'Why, what is wrong with Fateh?'

Mehar had no answer to this. She could only stare at Aunt Rajrani. Fateh certainly had no faults. He was young, well-built with a clean look, what more could one want? But Mehar still did not want to marry him.

Fateh was her first cousin, her father's brother's son. After the death of his parents, he had lived with Mehar's father, Gasha the milkman. It was not out of pity for the orphan that Gasha had taken him in, but because the other half of the house owned by the two brothers would also come to him if he took the responsibility of raising Fateh—not forgetting to acquire his dead brother's four cows too. The fact was that in spite of having been married twice, he did not have a son of his own. Having Fateh also meant that he would always have someone to assist him in his dairy work. Besides, if he turned out to be a good boy, Mehar could be married to him and his daughter need never leave her home.

Fateh did turn out to be a good boy. From the age of eight, it was he who would take the cows to graze in the common, keep an eye on them, and drive them home at dusk. He was the one who delivered the pots of milk to the customers, collected the money due from them, and handed it over to Gasha. As the years passed, more and more responsibilities were shouldered by him. He was doing everything except saving any money of his own.

He was strong, honest, and hardworking. But for all that, Mehar did not find a single spark of life in him. That spark which adds a naughty glint to the eye, a scent to the word, and a warmth to the body. Once an orphan, his identity was just this house, four cows, and hard work—nothing beyond. The real Fateh just wasted away.

Mehar used to hear everyone say that she would be married to Fateh when she grew up. But she never once saw Fateh in that respect. To her, he was a cold, lifeless figure, who seemed to have no regrets nor any zest for anything, almost an idiot. If he looked at her, it was with the same wooden look. There was no joy in his laughter. He was a machine that only knew how to work.

The heart is like a waterbody, enclosing in its small space the depth of the sky, the radiance of the sun, the laughter of the moon. Mehar knew what Fateh lacked, but she could not define it in words. So she could give no reply to her aunt's query. Aunt Rajrani put the chillum back on the hookah after blowing on the coal, and asked again, 'Is it that you have someone else in mind?'

'Oh no, nothing of the sort, only....'

Beyond this she could not say anything more. She knew them all—Aunt Rajrani, Sultan Pandit, Kabir Wani—all the people for whom she used to carry water, at whose doorsteps she could only bring water, but never what was in her heart. To her they were like a different tribe, who would not mix with her socially. Mehar's clothes were soiled with dung, and she smelt of waterweeds. Before her were sandy shallows through which no boat could sail or find a shore, where no prince would come and exchange rings with her, where no one sang veiled songs to her.

Mehar did look around, but she found nobody. Except for a middle-aged Hanji, whose boat Fateh would sometimes help her moor, whose arms and legs had turned black with applications of tar, and whose mouth was lined with foam with all that shouting he did at his customers to be heard above the noise at the ghat. His face was like an upturned pot pierced by two holes like the eyes of a mongoose. And then there was the weaver's apprentice, who worked on a loom at the window next door. There was also the small shopkeeper, an opium addict, to whom everyone went for eye medicine, chilblain ointment, cough syrup, or fever mixture. Apart from them, she could see nobody, no one at all.

Mehar seemed to become conscious of her own self: medium height, long hair, well-rounded arms and legs, a smell of perspiration coming from her youthful body. This figure, surely, deserved to be looked at by someone. And this figure certainly should have found someone to look at. She thought about it for a long time, but she found no one.

But the heart is a teardrop which does not fall, the desire that cannot be mentioned, those thoughts which are never born, which never turn into reality.

But still Mehar felt that she would find somebody, someday, someone who would masterfully grasp her arm and carry her away in a palanquin, someone whom she did not know, whose face she did not see clearly, but who was nothing like Fateh. A shadow lurked in Mehar's mind, tempting her, enticing her. But she still could not give an answer to Aunt Rajrani's query.

Aunt Rajrani moved the kangri from under her right knee to the left, put away the hookah pipe and again asked, 'Then why are you against Fateh?'

'Oh no, I have nothing against him,' Mehar's feeling could not find utterance and tears rose to her eyes at this inability to communicate her feelings. 'But I don't want to marry Fateh. Can't you please tell Gasha?' Mehar pleaded tearfully.

Aunt Rajrani removed the prop of the kangri from under her knee, shrugged her shoulders, stretched her arms, and consoled Mehar, 'All right, I will tell him. But my dear, you know how times have changed, who listens to anyone now? But for your sake, I will speak to him.'

What Aunt Rajrani had said proved true. Gasha did not listen to her, he only listened to his self-interest and his second wife's advice. The nikah was read out, a few wedding songs sung, some people fed, a day full of cheerful chatter, a couple of gas lamps lit at night, and Mehar was married to Fateh.

Mehar was still where she had been, leaning against that very pillar, on the steps of that same threshold, those same dung heaps and waterweed piles that dogged her steps. Today too Fateh was the same Fateh he had been for her in the past, still without a single spark of life in him, as if it was not the bride's hennaed hands, but the tether of a cow he held in his grip and like an idiot he did not know whether to take her to feed in the common or tie her to the post. He certainly had not brought any freshness or a whiff of change into Mehar's life. She was sunk even deeper into the well of her life, whose darkness she was aware of but could not describe in words. Once she wanted to throw herself out of window, but then she thought that after all nothing had changed. Didn't she survive living with her stepmother all these days? She would lead the same kind of existence from now on, with Fateh. She could not say it and her father could not hear and that was that....

A whole year passed. Nobody noticed its passing, no one saw any change or newness in it. Her friends were the same, the same sun warmed everyone, nights grew shorter and longer as they always did, the house and its work went on as usual. Only one thing had changed, Gasha had taken a dislike to Fateh.

Gasha began to believe—and this belief was reinforced by his second wife—that Fateh had become his own man after marriage. He detected a swagger in his manner and one day he had even kept for himself the money collected from a customer. Besides, Gasha heard from someone that Fateh had gone around saying that Gasha should account for the money that he had collected on behalf of his father. With someone else he had left word that Gasha should vacate his half of the house. Tensions grew until one day Gasha announced to the neighbourhood that he was going to ask Fateh to fend for himself, he would no longer be a part of his household and that he was seeking divorce from Fateh for his daughter. He had also begun to tell Mehar, 'You were so right, Mehar, last year. He is really a miserable wretch, let him rot on his own now. I will show him how I will find a new match for you.' And his words would remind Mehar of the lamp extinguished a year ago, the lost account of the days of a whole year.

Today, when Gasha began to shout and scream in the yard, Mehar seemed to wake up from deep sleep. She seemed to see a light somewhere, becoming aware of where she was, who she was, and what her situation was and suddenly, she remembered that day, when....

She was watching from the veranda that day just as she was today when Fateh climbed up from the ghat, carrying a huge load of waterweeds in a large pannier. His legs were unsteady and he seemed to stagger and fall against the shed wall. Mehar had come forward to help him put the load down. Laying the pannier down, Fateh had closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again it was as if light had returned to them. He regained his breath and wiped his face drenched from the water seeping through the pannier. Mehar watched him for a while and then said, 'Why do you carry such a heavy load?'

This sympathy seemed to give the authority of a husband to his tone when he replied, giving a shake to his wet cap, 'What to do...is there a choice?'

'You should have let it go to hell,' Mehar burst out unthinkingly. That day she had felt the first stirrings of pity for Fateh. After all he too was human, how much could he do, how far could he strain himself, how much hard work could his body bear? When no one could do so much, how could her life partner? Did they think he was a giant? This feeling of concern left her with a strange emotional satisfaction. While thinking of it now, the same feeling filled her whole body. She put her whole weight against the window. She felt the urge to shout, to call out Fateh's name loudly. Suddenly, another thought came to her. Gasha's voice roared in her ears...he wanted her to leave Fateh, she herself wanted it a year ago. A year ago, she had felt no pity for Fateh. But after one year why was she feeling this concern for Fateh? Why did she care? Is one's destiny written down, inescapable? Does the heart set its little traps insidiously? What had Fateh done for her, after all?

Mehar did not know what she asked herself, but the memory of something came to her, unbidden. It was a day in the month of Sravan and she was standing, leaning her elbow against the wall, and feeling ravenously hungry. It was mid-afternoon, so not a time to eat. The cooking fires were out, the pots and pans empty. It was hours to teatime. She could have found something to eat, but her stepmother would not allow it. Fumbling in the pannier, she had found only two lily seedpods, but they had only made her even hungrier. The day darkened before her eyes and then Fateh had appeared. Nudging her, he had asked, 'What are you doing, standing here in the hot sun?'

'Nothing,' Mehar did not want to say it, but she did, 'I am very hungry, my innards are being torn apart!' Fateh looked as if he had been hit by something. He patted her shoulder and said, 'Why didn't you tell me? Wait, I will get you some bread.' Fateh came back almost running from the baker with two tsochvor breads. He was out of breath. For a long time afterwards, Mehar kept feeling his touch, his patting on her shoulder, the sound of his panting breath kept ringing in her ears. Impatiently, she waited for him to finish work so that she could talk to him, look at him properly.

Mehar let go of the window, suddenly feeling that till this day she had not looked at Fateh properly. This past year had gone by without her being aware of it. Of course, she had talked to Fateh, worked with him in the house, doing all the jobs, quarrelling with him occasionally, but she felt that she had still not seen him properly. And now that she had, her father wanted her to leave him. Why had he not listened to her a year ago? Her heart had different feelings a year ago, the whole story was different then, but today....

Mehar seemed to trace lines on the hem of her garment. God knows what the lines were trying to say, unknown to Mehar. She was thinking of last Eid. She was sitting at her window, watching the Wanis' daughters and daughters-in-law performing the festive Rov and singing softly, when a Wani boy walked in with a new shoebox in hand. One of their girls came out of the Rov circle and asked him, 'Did you go to the tailor?' A desire stirred in Mehar's heart—she should also have had something new for Eid the next day, when that other girl would sport a new scarf on her head, new chappals on her feet. She herself had worn her marriage outfit on last

Eid. She could wear it again, but she would still need a dupatta. And in the evening, how Fateh had surprised her, laying a length of muslin before her. She could not believe her eyes and for a while had been speechless, then the thought of Fateh's ragged clothes had struck her. 'Didn't you get anything for yourself?' she had asked him.

'Oh, forget it, my clothes don't matter. But tell me, is this dupatta all right for you?' She had found a new Fateh that day. Lying down now she found that newness of Fateh had entered into her, seeped in to such an extent that now it had acquired a shape, something that had Mehar's supple, strong body and Fateh's face, simple, a pure expression with power to move the heart. The shape came forward, walked to her and put its arms around her neck and Mehar was hugging herself, holding her own self in a tight embrace, lost in the memory of another day in the past....

The cow had just delivered and Mehar was holding the new calf by his ears and pulling him to her, while he strained to free himself from her grip to go to his mother for milk. Mehar seemed to enjoy this tussle, but the cow's ears had stiffened up in anger. 'Let him go, you will pull the poor thing's ears out,' Fateh spoke from the doorway.

'Look! How angry the cow is, he ears are standing up,' said Mehar.

'Shouldn't she be upset? After all, it is the mother's pain she is feeling. What would you know about it!' said Fateh with an unusual glint of naughtiness and Mehar suddenly felt shy. The memory brought the same blush to her cheeks now, sending a warm current coursing through her whole body, making her breasts tingle with a strange sensation. Her heart seemed to have become a delicate, fragile thing. It had come out of its usual place, it seemed, and started playing with angels.

What is a heart, after all? The heart is lending a hand to a heavy load. The heart is a tsochvor to the hungry, the gift of a dupatta on Eid, that newness which has been cherished and preserved within the core of one's heart since the beginning of time. Mehar could not explain it but her heart seemed to light her way to the realization that Fateh was the spark in the heap of ashes, the lotus in the sweep of waterweeds, the moth fluttering through dung piles, only for her, his laughter only for her and suddenly, she knew that if she should leave him, he would drown in the marshes. He was that shadowy figure she had dreamed would carry her away in a palanquin. What had been a vague shadow in the past, had assumed a form now, that of a young, well-built, pure-faced bridegroom that she had found. If she should lose him, her world would be plunged into darkness.

Almost unknowingly, Mehar took a decision and went to Aunt Rajrani.

Aunt Rajrani was smoking her hookah, the kangri under her knee.

'Please, Aunt Rajrani, tell Gasha not to get me divorced from Fateh.'

'Oh ho, has Fateh cast such a powerful spell on you?'

'Oh, nothing like a spell, but,' Mehar was trying hard to explain what it was, 'but I don't want to leave him. Won't you please tell Gasha?'

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